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Prologue

Stars shone brightly on the StarClan cats. Prey squeaked around them in a frenzied symphony as they pounced on them one after another. The air was full of contentment and laughter. The breeze was as soft as silk.

Leafpool sat solemnly underneath the shade of a tree, staring into the distance with a wistful touch to her gaze. Oblivious to everyone and every thing around her, she didn't bother to glance at them.

A few fox-lengths away, Sandstorm and Firestar were playing with Juniperkit and Dandelionkit passing a round moss ball back and forth. Dandelionkit and Juniperkit argued who was the best warrior, while Sandstorm's whiskers twitched in amusement. Bed time was mentioned, but postponed in the bliss of the moment.

"I wish we never had to sleep!" Dandelionkit pounced forward for her turn.

"I want to check to see if I can gather more moss and make it bigger!" shouted Juniperkit.

In the middle of the paradise, Bluestar was as serious as ever, a thoughtful, expression on her face. Mothflight licked her paws nonchalantly, while Bluestar spoke.

"The warrior code is being upheld, but I feel a strange darkness is approaching. I wish I could know what it was." Bluestar meowed.

"As long as the warrior code is followed," Here Mothflight shot Leafpool a meaningful glance, "nothing bad should come to the Clans. We should find reassurance in that."

Bluestar nodded her head. "True, but I cannot explain this sensation I have. I hope nothing bad will not come to pass." She looked around her in all directions warily. "We should keep close watch just in case."

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The starlit sky glistened down upon the cats of StarClan in their dens. Their bellies were full of prey and warmth after a long day of enjoyment.

Yet in her nest, Leafpool twitched uncomfortably.

Something was wrong.

She didn't know what it was, but there was a dark, choking presence that did not belong in StarClan. It was too quiet for her. The air felt too still, yet the trees were shaking in anticipation.

Leafpool slowly got to her paws, her fluffy pelt bristled in alarm.

Outside, the stars were gone, and the trees shivered harder, more ominously than before. There was no light in StarClan. A darkness had swept over it leaving it pitch black. Leafpool heard other StarClan cats meows of dismay and confusion.

"What's happening?" She picked out Bluestar's mew that slowly became more curdled and muffled until silenced.

"Bluestar!" Mothflight exclaimed in alarm somewhere deep in the blackness of the forest, her voice vanishing suddenly.

Leafpool tilted her head, her ears pricked as she heard a sound that could only be described as the whole of StarClan exploding with a bellowing, angry wail.

"Run!" Sandstorm's pelt brushed past Leafpool. The she cat's green eyes were wide with distress and worry.

"Save the kits!" Firestar yelled as he burst with speed next to her.

"What about Bluestar and Mothflight?" Leafpool's voice trembled

with panic, as her gaze tried to search in the darkness. All she could see was StarClan cats running on either sides like the wind, as if they were prey being hunted. A well of dark shadows crept out from the undergrowth and spread like a tongue twisting and extending to engulf every thing and every one near it.

"Run!" Sandstorm repeated to Leafpool. "There is no time! We must escape from here!"

Leafpool hurried alongside Sandstorm and Firestar as they carried Dandelionkit and Juniperkit separately in their jaws.

Snowfur, Bluestar's sister, gripped Mosskit in her jaws as she padded with an extreme force of speed, her fluffy fur blown back in the storm.

Where is Bluestar? Why isn't she here with us? Leafpool panicked in her mind silently.

Some cats joined to escape. But there were others that were missing. Aside from Bluestar and Mothflight, Leafpool realized many other cats were missing. It was hard to tell in the craze of the moment, but she could not see Rowanstar, Tallstar, Honeyfern, Berrynose, and Stemleaf.

For a heart-stopping moment, Leafpool's eyes darted everywhere frantically in search of Hollyleaf.

No! she thought. *I can't lose her again!* Just as she wanted to turn and search, two ferns parted at the last minute to reveal Hollyleaf carrying Snowkit. Hollyleaf looked Leafpool in the eye and nodded in agreement silently. Both cats knew they had to leave, and do it fast without any questions.

"Everyone, run to the pool!" Firestar yowled to the remaining StarClan cats.

For once, Leopardstar didn't argue with him for commanding other cats. She nodded in solemn silence.

A gust of wind and darkness snapped at their tails and roared, deafening their ears and leaving them breathless, as they ran for

their lives to the glowing water of the living cats.

Leafpool knew that her sister, Squirrelstar, had once swam through the pool to the living world, and she could only hope that the same would be possible for the surviving cats.

The cats carrying the kits plunged into the pool first, and Leafpool felt a wave of relief when she saw Holllyleaf was safely through with Snowkit. Sandstorm carried Dandelionkit with her next with Firestar and Juniperkit following her close behind.

It seemed the cats were successfully leaving StarClan territory. But the moment of calm ended abruptly, as Leafpool heard heard a screech.

She tried to rush forward, but Runningnose was yanked backwards too quickly by long, dark claws. Then he was gone, vanished into a wall of heavy blackness.

"No!" Yellowfang yowled in pain, but Runningnose did not appear again. There was no trace of him.

"Go, go, go!", a voice yelled, pushing cats forward towards the Moonpool. "We can't look back!" Leafpool saw Sagewhisker nudge Yellowfang along with the other cats, as she earned a reproachful look from Yellowfang. The medicine cat's yellow eyes were filled with grief, but she remained speechless. A silent vigil repeated in her mind for her lost apprentice.

The silence was broken again. Sunstar let out a wail as he slipped on a gnarled branch reaching from the ground and then was swallowed by a wave of darkness.

Someone pushed Leafpool from behind before she could see any more, and she fell into the pool.

She thrashed her starry paws, swimming to a beam of moonlight that she assumed was the Moonpool of the living world.

She sucked in greedy gasps of air as she surfaced and pulled herself onto the ground.

The wet, silvery bodies of the StarClan cats lay panting beside her, and Leafpool saw Dandelionkit's fluffy, wet tail sticking high in the air.

"That was fun!" She squealed. "Can we do it again?"

There was no response, and only Juniperkit nodded in agreement.

Chapter 1

Meows seemed to echo and bounce off the forest, increasing in intensity, as cats from all clans came together for the Gathering. Pelts of cream, black, gray, ginger, all colors in between, splattered across a sea of green grass. They spoke all together at the same time; some of them fluffing their tails, while others padded about or shared tongues with their Clanmates.

One cat stood silent among all of them. He looked up wearily at the branch he was going to take his place on as the gathering was to begin.

Finally, Crowstar thought to himself. His black fur was matted, and his blue eyes were annoyed as he reached his branch.

All the other cats seem to have forgotten that this is business. Too much gossip going on as usual.

Slowly, Squirrelstar, Reedstar, and Tigerstar all took their places on the branches beside Crowstar. The deputies followed them to the roots of the old, bare, tall tree.

Crowstar yowled out the call to begin the gathering, and hundreds of furry heads turned to his attention.

"ThunderClan will speak first," Squirrelstar announced, taking a step forward.

A ShadowClan cat grumbled and rolled his eyes.

"The prey is running well in ThunderClan, and we have-" Squirrelstar began, but stopped. Her eyes blinked and searched for something in the distance with uncertainty. Her mouth remained tightly locked with tension.

Worry grew among the ThunderClan cats as they saw their leader's reaction. But none of them could find words either. For at the edge of the island, silvery, starry pelts were trickling through like sun looking down upon the dawn.

Crowstar narrowed his eyes impatiently at Squirrelstar, but even he stopped when he saw the pelts drawing nearer. All the clan cats parted in the middle of the island to make way for the glowing, starry guests. Many of them had love beaming in their eyes. Some were filled with so much excitement that they started jerking, as if they wanted to leap forward. All of them stood watching in awe as StarClan came closer and closer to them.

The StarClan cats were beautiful, majestic, and breathtaking. Their presence came with feelings of comfort, love, and peace. Every cat was so caught up in the moment that no one could ask why they were there.

Crowstar's heart leaped with hope as he saw a brown, shimmery pelt he would know anywhere. *It had to be her,* he thought to himself. *Of all the cats in StarClan, it has to be her.*

As the pelts finished crossing towards the Clan leaders, an endless tide of sparkling bodies filling up the island, Crowstar spotted Firestar at the lead with Leopardstar. The RiverClan she-cat was rolling her eyes at him like usual.

He was quite certain it was her muttering disdainful comments to Firestar, but either no cat near them noticed, or they were too stunned to comment. Every cat was locked into the moment of StarClan's glory.

"Firestar!" Squirrelstar was the first to speak. She leapt toward him, meowing happily. Her bushy tail bristled with excitement, and her green eyes danced with delight.

Crowstar could have sworn he heard Breezepelt snort in disgust.

Seeming to forget she was a Clan leader, Squirrelstar went further into the flurry of starry pelts to meet Sandstorm and two meowing kits.

"Dandelionkit, Juniperkit!" Squirrelflight gushed happily. She began to lick them fervently.

The family embrace was noticed by all cats, but Crowstar was rather distracted. His gaze was determined and fixated on the silhouete of a starry brown pelt further away.

Has she really come back after all this time?...

"Crowstar!" Feathertail burst through the StarClan cats, a rich velvet purr in her voice, as she made her way towards his branch. He climbed down to meet her, ignoring Nightcloud's murderous glare.

"It's so good to see you-" Feathertail's gaze darkened. She looked around anxiously at the other cats surrounding them. "If only it were under better circumstances."

Crowstar threw a longing glance at the brown she-cat in the distance.

I wish I could speak to her, then I would know from her voice if it is her...

"Crowstar!" Feathertail urged. "Crowstar, are you listening to me?"

Nightcloud hissed from the crowd, but Crowstar decidedly ignored her. He preferred to speak to Feathertail, although his gaze showed otherwise.

"Yes," Crowstar replied. He was finally rewarded as the brown she-cat's silhouette raised her head, and her amber eyes met his.

She is as mesmerizing as she always was. As I remember her.

If only my clan wasn't watching! His practical mentality interrupted the moment, along with a hostile voice raising over the cats.

"This is all wonderful and everything," Breezepelt snapped from where he was sitting beside Nightcloud. His gaze was shooting and targeting Crowstar so fiercely, it nearly stung with its venomous glare. "But why is the *whole* of StarClan here? Surely only one cat or two is needed to give us a prophecy."

A hushed silence fell over the cats. Some words were hard to speak. And while the reuniting of all the living cats with the unliving was momentous and struck every cat's heart, there was still something strange about the event. Something concerning.

This is not normal, thought Crowstar.

"Where is Rowanstar?" Tawnypelt interrupted the silence. "Why isn't he here?"

Her son Flametail's gaze clouded with worry, and Dawnpelt looked away, turning her face away from the gaze of other cats. The silent answer from StarClan was the worst answer possible, and their heads bowed in grief simultaneously.

"There is something wrong in StarClan-" Firestar began.

"Go ahead and speak for us- we all knew you were planning to do so in the first place," Leopardstar meowed drily.

Firestar sighed in exasperation as he narrowed his eyes. "Even in death and during a time of crisis, she must fight with me", mumbled Firestar.

Crowstar spotted several cats' whiskers twitch in amusement.

"Can't you stop squabbling like kits and tell us what's going on?" Jayfeather snapped, interrupting the humor. His furious blind gaze fixed on where the StarClan cats were standing in the middle of the island. "Stop beating around the bush like usual."

Crowstar saw Leafpool looking at Jayfeather with a mix of irritation and affection.

"StarClan has news," Firestar continued, and Jayfeather snorted.

"I'm blind and I can tell that," he muttered.

"A dark force has driven us from our homes," Leafpool explained, as she padded to the front of the Starclan group. "Several cats are missing, and our only chance to escape was through the Moonpool to the living world."

"But what force is more powerful than StarClan?" Breezepelt sneered at her.

"This is different, Breezepelt," Leafpool meowed sharply, "The force was too strong, and we only know one thing."

"What is that?" Reedstar urged politely from a corner of the crowd.

"This darkness came from a living cat. We know this because the cat who brought the force into StarClan was living and should not have been there in the first place. The force brought with them was also moving, growing, and alive with fury."

An uproar of yowls came from the crowd of cats.

"What warrior would do such a thing?!"

"No cat here has that power!"

"You are supposed to be the powerful ones!"

"Enough!" Yellowfang bellowed, and everyone fell silent. "The truth is that if this cat is walking among the living, our only chance is to find them and stop them before both our worlds are destroyed. We cannot return to StarClan till this force is gone, and it is somewhere here among the Clans."

A hushed quiet fell over the island, as if every cat was taking in the information, shocked.

"How can you be so sure a living cat has done this? What if the cats of the Dark Forest are behind this?" Squirrelstar questioned.

It was Leafpool who answered. "The Dark Forest is almost empty after the Great Battle and the battle with Ashfur. This was too powerful to come from any Dark Forest cat. It was a living being, but it was unrecognizable to us. We never encountered any strength or power like it before."

"How are we supposed to find this cat?" Sneezecloud from RiverClan meowed. "We each have our own borders and separate clans."

"You must come together as one, just as you came together as LionClan during the battle against Scourge." Yellowfang meowed in a deep, commanding voice.

"I'm not going anywhere near ThunderClan mange-pelts!" Breezepelt hissed indignantly and arrogantly.

"You will do what your clan leader tells you!" Crowstar yelled back in response. Breezepelt shrunk back in a hurt manner, as if he had been raked by claws on his face. Heathertail brushed her tail against him for comfort, but in his arrogance, he lifted his head proudly and glared defiantly at his father.

"I think Yellowfang is right," Mothwing agreed, "If this force is so powerful that it can destroy StarClan, we will need all our efforts united as one clan."

"Where should we set up camp?" Tigerstar was the first cat to speak. "I can assure you ShadowClan land is full of prey. It would have options for every cat in terms of prey, and the pine trees would help us remain hidden and camouflaged while we search for this force."

"ThunderClan territory has just as much prey, and the force can also easily hide amongst the pine trees too! It is better if we search for this dark cat in a more open territory." Thriftear protested.

"The moor is full of prey too, and it is closest to the moonpool! This might come to the aid of StarClan if they wish to travel through it again quickly." Crowstar argued, secretly thinking about being in the same camp as Leafpool.

"We should stay as far away from the Moonpool as possible, not close to it," Leafstar, the SkyClan leader added thoughtfully. "Our territory is sheltered and further away from the Moonpool, and it has plenty of prey for all cats. It is the best territory for the situation."

"Everyone stop arguing like mouse-brains! You are supposed to come together, and the first thing you do is argue! You should be ashamed of yourselves!" Leopardstar roared.

"Says the cat who needs help," Breezepelt grumbled, and Heathertail slapped her fluffy tail over his muzzle, silencing him. She glared at him, clearly frustrated.

"Then where do you suggest we stay?" Crowstar questioned, his gaze meeting Firestar.

Firestar looked among the cats and answered smoothly, "I think the best solution will be for us to make camp in Riverclan because it is furthest from the Moonpool. We do not know whether this dark force of shadows can enter this world through the Moonpool, and I do not feel comfortable with so many cats being near the place where it attacked."

"Then it is decided," Yellowfang mewed. "We need to begin the preparations for all cats to move into Riverclan. It will take some adjusting-"

"I don't know if I will be able to swim," Cloudtail complained. *I wish I hadn't come*, he thought, *this is really bad news, and the walk here was too much effort.*

"We will try to make the best of the situation," Yellowfang continued. "It is possible that we can extend our hunting parties out a bit, so that different prey may be caught for other Clans."

It will be so crowded, Jayfeather thought. Yellowfang looked at him meaningfully, as if she understood what he was thinking. "All medicine cats should be united together with the cats. We don't know when this force will attack."

"I can show the other medicine cats the best places to find herbs," Mothwing suggested.

"RiverClan may swim like otters, but we forest cats don't belong near water!" Thornclaw complained. "I would rather sleep back in my old nest in ThunderClan territory."

"Oh. I used the moss from your nest to make mine even softer," Cloudtail meowed. "Sorry."

Thornclaw scowled at him and unsheathed his claws, but Ivypool

stuck her fluffy tail between them to stop their fight. She shook her head silently at both toms.

"For tonight, each clan should go back to their original camps, whether living or among the StarClan. Tomorrow at dawn, we will all gather on RiverClan territory to build our camp." Firestar decided.

Tigerstar opened his mouth to argue, but his mate, Dovewing murmured something to him, and he nodded reluctantly along with the other cats.

Somehow, all the clans had managed to reach an agreement.

At least for now.

Chapter 2

A bird flew overhead in the glowing, night sky. It was a crisp, cool night as rich, autumn leaves gracefully tilted and fell to the forest floor, and Thunderclan paws crunched on them continuously.

Firestar took the lead with Squirrelstar. Juniperkit and Dandelionkit pranced about squishing the leaves in their paws and plopping down on the piles. Leafpool was gazing up at the sky, a deep, thoughtful expression on her face. Cloudtail stayed in the back, breathing heavily and keeping an eye on the StarClan cats with an exhausted expression on his face.

What if I have to share some of my moss with all these other cats? His worries about his own comfort were interrupted by a feeling, a feeling that some cat was watching him. Brightheart walked in the middle of the Starclan group, gazing upon Cloudtail with a soft expression on her face. When their eyes met, she padded over to him.

"Cloudtail, I have missed your company so much. It is wonderful to see you again after all this time. I am sure so much has happened since I left."

Cloudtail looked at her with narrowed eyes, then his expression relaxed as he looked ahead. "I have been sleeping a lot. I try to get as much moss as possible in my nest, and now that I am in the elders' den, I have a lot of peace and quiet. Sleep is much more easier for me. But I do not feel there is enough prey for us elders. I know the warriors do their best to bring prey, but I always wish I could catch an extra mouthful midday."

Brightheart smiled at him warmly, but deep in her eyes, there was some hurt that Cloudtail was oblivious too. "I thought you would miss the times we shared together, but I see now that you are enjoying the solitude of the elders den."

Cloudtail looked up guiltily, "Of course, I always miss you! It's just that now I am an elder, there are so many distractions. I can focus more on myself- my sleeping and eating, that is. But I never regret our time together."

"I am always with you, Cloudtail," she said in a hushed voice.

But she quickly padded away to join other cats. Her ears turned downward.

Did I hurt her feelings? Cloudtail wondered. As the cats entered the Thunderclan camp, he lumped over to his den and curled up on his massive pile of moss and feathers without a single other thought.

Jayfeather and Alderheart retreated to the medicine den in deep conversation without a single glance at the cats around them.

When Squirrelstar arrived in the camp, Brambleclaw stretched out his head, staring wide-eyed at the StarClan cats. "What is-"

"Don't worry," Squirrelstar said, "StarClan is here to help us. There are some difficult times ahead, but we will be able to get through it with their help and the help of the other Clans." In her mind, Squirrelstar wanted to calm Brambleclaw and break the events to him as gently as possible.

However, Brambleclaw's thoughts seemed to be wandering with his gaze. He was not focusing on her words. "Are there any other cats with StarClan?", he asked suddenly.

Squirrelstar narrowed her eyes and answered shortly, "No!"

Firestar looked awkwardly at both of them, trying to break the tension in the air. "Would you prefer the StarClan cats to be spread out among the warriors' and elders' dens? We can put the kits in the nursery. The medicine cats in their den. That way one den won't be too overcrowded."

"I think that would be a good idea," Squirrelstar responded. "I will go tell the other cats."

As she padded away, Brambleclaw thought she would not hear him,

as he leaned towards Firestar and said, "Did you see any loner cat named Jessy in StarClan or on your way here?"

Suddenly, Squirrelstar cleared her throat loudly from a distance. But Brambleclaw looked anxiously for an answer from Firestar.

"No, I did not. I think I should see to the other cats, and make sure everyone knows about the move tomorrow." He padded away uncomfortably and suddenly.

Rolling her eyes grumpily, Squirrelstar padded past Brambleclaw, giving him a slight side eye.

Goosefeather, Featherwhisker, and Yellowfang were all standing inside the cramped medicine den with Leafpool, Alderheart, and a very annoyed-looking Jayfeather.

"Give us some room, will you?" Jayfeather snapped, struggling to move in the cramped den. "We need to put away some herbs we were sorting through."

"I can help out," Leafpool offered tenderly.

"Alderheart, you find another place for all these medicine cats to stay before I pull my whiskers out trying." Jayfeather snapped, and Yellowfang's fur bristled.

"I can't work with no space." He glared at her with his sightless eyes.

"I just need a warm nest full of moss," Goosefeather announced, "And I'd like some feathers on it too."

"Goosefeather, you're lying on on my tail!" Featherwhisker moaned.

"Could everyone please leave?" Alderheart asked, but either no cat heard him, or no cat decided to listen. He paused, trying his best to sound not rude. "We really need to finish sorting through the herbs and store them so they stay fresh." He tried to explain carefully and gently.

"Everyone out!" Jayfeather snapped. "Or I will leave."

Yellowfang muttered about how young cats had no respect for their elders. She left eventually with Featherwhisker following her. Goosefeather had tried to fall asleep in Jayfeather's nest, but Leafpool nudged him outside. On her way out of the den, she hesitated and paused,

"Jayfeather, do you think I could-" Leafpool started.

"No, now leave with the rest of them! Alderheart, find a place for them to sleep, so we can finish sorting through these herbs." His fluffy grey fur was bristling, although his eyes rounded slightly in regret as he watched Leafpool pad away dejectedly.

Jayfeather sighed in relief when it was just him and Alderheart. They started to work silently, mechanically, each one deep in thought.

A wail of panic broke out from the clearing, stopping them in their tracks. They froze for a moment.

Oh, what now? Jayfeather thought. *What if it's Leafpool?* He remembered her expression after he had refused her help and darted towards the clearing trying not to show his worry. He started hotly, "If I find out all this fuss is because a kit has a thorn in its paw, I-"

Jayfeather stopped before he continue speaking.

The reek of death was heavy in the air along with something much more evil. Like Leafpool had stated, it was nothing Jayfeather had scented or felt before. The camp had become unusually dark and silent, except for cries and exclamations coming from the scared, stunned cats. An ominous, dark cloud had nearly swallowed up most of the light from the moon.

"Cloudtail!" Brightheart moaned repeatedly in anguish over the creamy blanket of lifeless, still fur.

All the Thunderclan cats emerged from their dens, some faster than others. Questioning, frantic, and panicked meows filled the air.

"What happened? He was just sleeping."

"How could this happen in our camp, and no cat noticed?"

"Is it possible another Clan did it?"

"I fear not," Leafpool frowned. "I scent the same smell in the air that was in StarClan. It is the cat, the cat of shadows. Its darkness is spreading. I was hoping it would not attack till we were all together in RiverClan, but it moves too fast and too strong for us to notice."

"Cloudtail, there were so many cats with him." Brightheart agreed mournfully.

"I thought we would be safer if we stayed in groups, but obviously not." Firestar's eyes were clouded and full of dismay.

"He was a great warrior and a thoughtful elder-" Brightheart started.

"There is no question of that," Squirrelstar responded quickly, "But I think right now we need to bury him quickly and focus on our move to Riverclan as soon as possible. Right now, we need to focus on keeping every cat safe."

As they retired back to their dens, Brightheart and several other cats remained by Cloudtail's side. Jayfeather look inquisitively. Cloudtail's eyes were wide and blue with a blank, icy glaze. That gave him an idea.

"Alderheart, I think we should look over Cloudtail's body to see if there are any signs of this shadow."

"Sure," Alderheart padded closer.

"Try to make sure you get it right. I will watch you to check your work," Jayfeather responded emotionless, yet he felt overwhelmed by the situation. *How could the Clans survive when even StarClan themselves didn't know exactly what was going on and what evil was at work?*

Alderheart carefully checked Cloudtail's mouth and swept through the thick, wispy tufts of fur, each layer at a time meticulously.

Leafpool padded over anxiously, "Did you find any signs?"

"Make sure you check his muzzle carefully," Goosefeather yawned.

"I just...I can't find anything. It's strange." Alderheart paused and looked at the medicine cats around him. "I feel the life was taken out of him forcefully, but when I check his body, I can't find any signs."

"Wait!" Yellowfang broke through the cats, pushing past them. "Look at his paws!"

Alderheart did so, and all the medicine cats gulped a breath of air and held it for a split second.

"His paws are so red that they are almost bleeding." Leafpool stated in a calm, small voice.

"Do you think that means that he was attacked from his paws?" Jayfeather prodded further, forgetting his previous tensions with Leafpool. *I have to find out why,* he thought.

"I remember when we were in StarClan. The shadow travelled through every thing and appeared suddenly, spreading so quickly. I suppose it could also move through the earth too." Leafpool said softly and sadly.

"And if that is the case-" Brightheart's voice cut off. "the shadow could move swiftly unseen and kill Cloudtail from underground. Poor Cloudtail!" She cried out in a broken meow.

"I'm right here." A voice away in the elders den snorted suddenly. Jayfeather's ears pricked in curiosity and his round, striped tail stood up tall. Leaving the dead body, Jayfeather went straight to the elders den' to find a foggy silhouette of Cloudtail stifling a yawn.

Brightheart appeared behind Jayfeather, and dashed towards the figure.

"But-but you died!" Brightheart sobbed, her voice trying to search for some hope.

Cloudtail looked her in the eyes and nodded. "And now I'm a spirit."

He responded sleepily and calmly.

All the medicine cats had now gathered into the elders den.

"Cloudtail, what happened? What do you remember?" Jayfeather's pelt was bristled with excitement and interest. *Perhaps I could figure out which cat was behind this, and Cloudtail would remember something helpful.*

But Cloudtail responded swiftly and shortly, much to all the cats' dismay. "I was sleeping, and I felt a shadow fall over me, then I found myself here."

"Your paws, Cloudtail- what happened to them? You don't remember feeling any pain in them before you died?" Yellowfang pressed.

"The shadow swallowed me. That is all I remember."

All the cats looked into each other's eyes helplessly.

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Chapter 3

The early dawn was windy and chilly. Cats mumbled and grumbled as they left the comfort of their dens in Thunderclan. Firestar and Squirrelstar tried to organize the cats as easily as possible, but there were many hard feelings. For some cats, it was a fear of the unknown. For others, they didn't like the idea of living on a new territory. Most of them didn't like living with other Clans under the same border. They shared a common fear now, a fear for their lives. Queens kept their tails protectively in front of their kits, checking surroundings carefully and moving at a slow place.

There were too many obstacles against them, and it showed in the eyes of every cat. The adjustments, fatigue, fear, and the violent wind storm was not encouraging them. Their pelts thrashed in the lashes of the wind, and the kits tumbled over several times losing their balance, resembling small, rolling fuzz balls.

Most cats followed with their tails down, heads low, ears alert. The beautiful autumn leaves were gone without a trace, somewhere swirling in the air in a far way place.

As the cats approached closer to WindClan border, they noticed the WindClan cats moving along the edge of the border similarly, heading towards the same destination. They gave each other wary glances occasionally. The tension in the air was increasing as the Clans grew closer to each other.

The lack of trust between the Clans is going to be a big hurdle, thought Leafpool. Firestar seemed to notice it too because he met her eyes with genuine concern.

Crowstar led his Clan through the pushes and pulls of the wind. Their pace was slow, and they also moved with unease and uncertainty.

"Somehow, we should join together and walk together to RiverClan", Leafpool whispered quietly to her father. She looked in Crowstar's direction, who in return, immediately turned his head to meet her gaze.

Firestar took it as an opportunity. He had the WindClan leader's attention finally.

"Crowstar!" He called out. Crowstar hesitated, wanting to join Firestar and see what he wanted, but also cautious of his appearance as Clan leader. He knew he had to be the leader his Clan wanted him to be: independent, strong, suspicious, and careful. He decided to pause instead of padding over to Firestar.

"Of course he would stop," muttered Nightcloud.

The Clans stood facing each other anxiously. Cold air whipped their fur, fluffing it in all directions aggressively. But there was no hostility between them. Their faces were saddened by their common enemy.

"Yes, Firestar?" Crowstar cocked his head to one side.

"This is an unusual circumstance for our Clans. But I think at a time like this, we should join together for our safety. We can walk together to RiverClan."

"Firestar is right." Squirrelstar continued. "Yesterday, our camp was attacked by the dark shadow. Cloudtail was killed. We have no idea where the enemy is, so it is probably safer for all us to move together as one. We can keep the elders and kits in the middle, so they are surrounded for their safety."

Breezepelt rushed over to his father's side. "I don't think we should listen to them." He glanced at Leafpool haughtily.

"Why?" Crowstar asked. "What reason do you have for not wanting more cats to walk together, so we can shield the kits and elders more? I see no harm in doing so. We will always be WindClan cats, but we also must do what is safest for our Clan. Right now what is safest for our Clan is also safer for ThunderClan."

"Unfortunately, that is the situation now." Yellowfang let out a sigh, whisking her tail about rhythmically.

" I can't wait till this is over with," Breezepelt muttered under this breath with a roll of his eyes.

Together, ThunderClan and WindClan padded towards the horseplace. Prey was unusually quiet, and the forest was eerie.

"Shouldn't we go around the horseplace?" Breezepelt protested. "It's bad enough having to stand the scent of ThunderClan cats!"

Every cat ignored his snide remark. The only answer he received was a belch of wind that blew in his direction and nearly knocked over his midnight pelt. Several cats near him tried very hard not to laugh.

Leafpool padded through the crowd of soft pelts and tried to make her way to the head of the cats where Crowstar and Squirrelstar were leading.

She wanted to move towards the front to speak to Squirrelstar. At least that is what she told herself, but she knew in heart, there was another reason too. She managed to reach Firestar right behind the two Clan leaders, but she couldn't move any further because in front of her, Nightcloud was blocking her path, trying very hard to get next to Crowstar too. The moment she saw Leafpool, her eyes began to boil with hot envy.

"Ahem." Nightcloud mewed haughtily from where she walked just behind Crowstar. "I was here first." She made it very clear she would not move at all for Leafpool.

"Could you move a little? I would like to speak to Squirrelstar about something." Leafpool mentioned her sister, but she at the same time, tried to catch a glimpse of Crowstar over the furry, fuzzy heads of the other cats. Nightcloud was not convinced. She narrowed her eyes.

"Shouldn't you be with the other medicine cats?"

At this point, Leafpool's patience finished and she snapped.

"I can walk wherever I want, and as I said before, I need to speak to Squirrelstar. She is my Clan leader, and it is my duty to report to her as a medicine cat. " Leafpool replied sharply.

Nightcloud's tail bushed up twice its size from the tone in Leafpool's voice.

Even in death, I can't escape from this she-cat, she thought to herself. Her thoughts, however, were interrupted abruptly by Crowstar's hissing. He had turned his cold, blue eyes on Nightcloud.

"Nightcloud, I can't see a thing from your tail! Move over! How am I suppose to keep watch over the territory when you block my vision?"

When looking at Nightcloud, Crowstar also saw Leafpool behind her, attempting to move towards the front. His heart melted at the sight of her. She looked so small and crumpled. She didn't even notice his glance.

"Let Leafpool pass by you, so she can speak with her Clan leader. This is not a time for silly kitty pet behavior. We have more important issues at hand."

Humiliated, Nightcloud scowled and marched to where Breezepelt was next to Heathertail. Her gaze never left Leafpool as she watched the tabby she-cat move to the front.

"Stop," A whiny voice came from next to Brightheart. All the cats stopped in their tracks and looked around anxiously for a disturbance. Every cat bristled on high alert.

Brightheart's soft, sweet voice immediately responded.

"Oh, Cloudtail, what's wrong? Are you alright?" She asked anxiously.

"My legs are stiff and tired," Cloudtail complained. "We need to sit down and have a break. I don't think we are anywhere near RiverClan yet, and I went through so much last night."

Yellowfang snorted and yelled exasperated, "StarClan cats don't get

tired! You're a spirit!"

"But my muscles ache," Cloudtail moaned. "I hurt all over. I'm so tired."

"We could stop to hunt," Squirrelstar suggested, trying to ease the tension and anger from Yellowfang. The last thing Thunderclan needed was commotion between cats.

"We're on WindClan territory!" Breezepelt burst out in rage. "No ThunderClan cat should eat WindClan prey! Even if this is a special circumstance, we should still keep some values of our Clans. Imagine if all of us hunt prey on WindClan territory. That is too much hunting in one place, and it might affect our prey later on when all this is over!"

He attempted to continue to ramble, but he stopped when he noticed Crowstar glare at him.

"This is a time of crisis," he said icily. "I will decide if ThunderClan cats can eat here, and you will obey my rules."

Breezepelt hung his head and lashed his tail. All the cats stared at him in disbelief, and his face was burned by their gazes.

It was agreed that they would stop to hunt to keep peace within Thunderclan, and so they could have an opportunity to rest. But hunting had to be done carefully. This was not a normal time. Together, the clans chose several warriors to go hunting, and the remaining warriors created a ragged circle around the queens, elders, and kits.

The medicine cats checked to see if any cats were injured, then they proceeded to look nearby for herbs, collecting several leaves in piles to carry later in their mouths. There was a sparse selection because of the harsh winds, but they managed to pick up a few sprigs each. The Clan leaders and their deputies discussed in hushed voices, trying to avoid any panic among the other groups. It was obvious as Firestar spoke to Crowstar, explaining to him what happened to Cloudtail, that the conversation was very upsetting to any cat who overheard.

In the midst of the temporary settlement, prey started to gather in piles. Most of the elders padded over to feed with the kits. There was one exception.

Brambleclaw had moved away from all of them, slowly approaching a group of bramble bushes off to the side. He padded alongside of him, quite oblivious to the other cats. One of the ThunderClan warriors, Thriftear, followed him and looked cautiously at the bramble bushes. They were quite a distance from the other cats. She stayed next to him very patiently waiting for him to head back to the prey pile, but Brambleclaw didn't move. He rested his paws on the earth and stared at the ground silently. A look of despair was in his eyes.

"Wait!" Thriftear jumped in front of Brambleclaw protectively, putting herself in front of the bushes. All the cats looked over at her to measure her reaction.

"There is movement in this bush! I saw the leaves trembling." She poked her head into the bushes and went through to investigate.

When she came back out of the bush, a dark brown she-cat was with her. All the cats gasped in horror, outrage, and fear.

"Who is this cat?"

"Maybe she is the enemy?"

"Does she have a clan?"

One voice rang out though and broke all the other voices, stunning the other cats into silence. Brambleclaw let out an overjoyed purr of "Jessy!" His energy all of the sudden was revived, and his eyes glistened with a sparkle that for so long had disappeared. He moved swiftly to the she-cat and touched noses with her.

The cats relaxed around them, but continued to look on as they reunited.

"Brambleclaw!", Jessy gushed in response.

Squirrelstar groaned internally. "Mouse-dung!" She muttered, "Don't

we have enough problems already?"

Jessy's eyes were glowing as she gazed at Brambleclaw. And in return, Brambleclaw had forgotten every other cat around them. He quickly fetched her a squirrel and returned back to her, but then he did move again. The two cats' heads hung close together as they chatted like old friends catching up. Squirrelstar knew better than that though.

She groaned again. Obviously, Brambleclaw had completely forgotten her. *This is not what we need now. We all need to be focused.*

Firestar's whiskers twitched as he padded up to Squirrelstar thoughtfully.

"So this is Jessy?" He called out to Brambleclaw, somewhat annoyed and humored at the same time.

"Yes, she's my mat- I mean, my friend." Brambleclaw answered shortly.

Squirrelstar glared at Jessy, and Firestar's whiskers twitched again.

Firestar was not only one who looked at the new she-cat with wary eyes.

The reunion was interrupted suddenly, as Crowfeather continued to narrow his gaze at Jessy. Eventually his anger seemed to erupt out of him, and he couldn't keep silent any longer.

"Wait!" Crowstar's stern meow came from where he had been edging towards Leafpool.

"She could have been spying on us or following us! How do we know she isn't working for the shadow cat, or she is the shadow cat?"

"That's ridiculous," Brambleclaw meowed quickly, "If she was the shadow cat, she would have killed us all easily, and not a single cat has died. Besides," Brambleclaw blinked warmly at Jessy, "I know Jessy. She would never betray the clans."

Squirrelstar let out a disgusted snort, and Greystripe looked ready to burst into laughter. He stopped when he felt Squirrelflight's glare.

Breezepelt continued where his father left off. "We can't trust her. She's a loner! She doesn't even follow the warrior code!" He snarled. "We should chase her off for being on WindClan territory in the first place! WindClan cats don't allow loners on their territory. Maybe other cats do though," he huffed with pride.

Brambleclaw was not persuaded, lost in the love and the lost moments with Jessy. He wrapped his tail protectively around her, and Squirrelstar dared to agree with Breezepelt. "That's a good idea," she continued, "We should chase her off. If she stays with us, it will only distract us further from the killer." She stopped herself and paused before she went any further.

Brambleclaw gave Squirrelstar a hurt look.

Why is she so mad at me? She knows how much Jessy means to me, and I haven't seen her for so long. As he played the victim, Brambleclaw internally refused to give up his fight for Jessy. He looked at her with warmth in his eyes. Even in his old age, Jessy reminded him of the Squirrelflight he use to love, long ago. He couldn't let go of that now.

"If she is working for the shadow cat, we shouldn't let her go. " Crowstar argued. "It's better for her to stay with us, so we can keep an eye on her."

Firestar and Squirrelstar nodded in silent agreement.

Good, Jessy thought, *although it will difficult to be around so many Clan cats. They are so rigid and annoying. But this works for my plan at least.*

"Don't worry. I will explain everything to you, Jessy. You see, every cat is very hostile because of the current danger in the forest that started in StarClan-" Brambleclaw quickly launched into a detailed explanation, and Squirrelstar rolled her eyes.

Sure, talk to Jessy. Why am I not surprised? Brambleclaw never

changes. Every time I think he will be a better mate, he disappoints me.

For the rest of the time, the cats continued eating in silence, except for Brambleclaw. The brown tom looked like he was back in his youth again.

Jessy was watching and listening carefully with very vague intentions and determination in her eyes.

Chapter 4

Way too many cats- Jayfeather thought to himself. *I will never be able to work in quiet in this place, and if I ever find a place for a nest, Goosefeather will probably take it from me.*

He rolled his eyes; his mouth carried a few herbs from his walk to RiverClan. The smell was overpowering, and all he really wanted to do was leave all the cats and explore a quieter nearby area. *How could this get any worse?*

The camp was chaotic. Kits were running freely, scrambling and tumbling under the warriors and elders, chasing each other. Their sweet faces smashed into the fluff of their Clans' tails, as they bumped almost every cat in every Clan. Their mothers tried desperately to pick them up and collect them together, but they were out of control, moving like little bees in a honey hive. One of the newer Queens, Cinderheart, was darting up and down the camp trying to catch one of her kits, Skykit.

But unfortunately Skykit thought it was a game, and he couldn't be stopped easily.

"I love this new camp!" He shouted gleefully. "I could run around all this space all day long."

His brother, Creamkit matched his pace and started running alongside him, laughter in his voice. "This is the best camp ever!"

Skykit started laughing along with him, and the two littermates tripped over each other, and tumbled like a massive scoop of sherbet fluff to the ground, laughing carefree in the midst of hard times.

Laughter stopped though momentarily, when Skykit cleared his

throat and let out a quick, dry cough. But their merriment quickly continued again as the two brothers pawed each other and continued racing around.

"Every cat enough!" Silence hit the camp. Crowstar's voice thundered over the raucous of kits and nagging clanmates. "There has to be some sense of order in all this, or we won't be successful in setting up a camp or defeating the enemy."

All the cats stopped and stared at him in alarm. The only sound was the ironic, serene flow of rushing water tumbling over glistening golden, gray, and white pebbles. The magical haze of the sun made the camp light up with an unreal, dreamy touch.

"I agree with Crowstar," Firestar began. "We need order. We need to divide into camps, figure out which warriors will hunt, and divide the other warriors here on the camp to protect."

"I will stay with Jessy." Brambleclaw offered. "She is not used to the Clan's ways, and she might need help."

Squirrelflight padded to Firestar, mumbling, "He's not really going to watch her carefully. We should make sure another cat watches them both. She could easily do something under his watch, and he won't even notice."

Leafpool joined Squirrelflight and Firestar, full of hope. "Mothwing has finished clearing out the medicine den for us already. It seems we are finally settling somewhat."

Finally, thought Jayfeather. He headed straight away to the medicine den before any other cat could arrive there, only to find Goosefeather taking a nap already in a nest. "Fox-dung!" He grunted. *Is there any way a cat can be alone in this place*?

The sun shifted, and the wind picked up a little in the camp. Its chilly edge had returned. Crowstar continued speaking, "The problem is going to be how to fit all the warriors." He spoke as he looked at Leafpool. "There should be warriors protecting the camp by the medicine den, but we should also extend some warriors outwards. There is no way the original RiverClan camp will fit all

these clans. I will keep myself, and some of my warriors here on the camp."

"There is plenty of space along the river!" Reedstar interjected. "Don't worry! We just need to create some nests under the ferns and trees, and gather some moss for bedding."

"Each of the Clan leaders should assign warriors for guarding, and the apprentices, along with some of the warriors, can go gather mo-"

In the middle of speaking, Crowstar broke off in a fit of coughing, and the cats listening gazed at him in alarm. They glanced at one another in silence and worry. A feeling of dread started to grow in the clan as all eyes looked upon Crowstar.

"Crowstar, are you sick?" Leafpool fretted, as she padded up to his side. But Crowstar shook his head with a glare. He had every intention of doing what he needed to do at a time like this.

"I am fine. WindClan is as strong as eve-" Crowstar let out a spasm of coughs, one after another. He was not able to speak again.

At this point, the cats started whispering to each other audibly and full of concern. Leafpool's head tilted as she examined him, then she stood directly in front of him blocking his vision stubbornly.

"It could be greencough from the cold weather. Crowstar, I think we should-" Leafpool's persistence was cut off quickly by the black tom.

"No!" Crowstar insisted with an air of defiance. "Our new camp needs to be built. We don't have time to waste."

Reedstar narrowed his eyes and padded next to Crowstar and Leafpool. Looking at Crowstar in the eyes sternly, he said, "We don't want sickness to spread to any of the kits or elders. You should have the medicine cats check on you. It won't take much time."

In the distance, Feathertail blinked at Crowfeather anxiously.

Crowstar lashed his tail, still insistent on not listening. "No cat

tells-"

Another cough shook his body, and Leafpool hurried to the medicine den where the small storage of herbs had been collected earlier that day. She immediately came back, moving smoothly, but she was filled with turbulence.

We have to contain this immediately, she thought. *There are not enough herbs for this many cats*! Her voice in her mind rose in a panic at the realization. They were not ready for an outbreak of any kind. They weren't even settled yet.

"I'll get the catmint ready. Kestrelflight, could you bring Crowstar over to the medicine den? Jayfeather, check on the elders and kits to make sure no other cat is sick. We don't know how far this has spread to other cats. Alderheart, you can check the warriors and the other leaders." Leafpool instructed each cat strictly, as the beginning of their new camp buzzed with activity.

"E-excuse me, Breezepelt, could you please stop carrying that moss? I need to check you for greencou-" Alderheart started nervously and timidly, but stopped suddenly. Breezepelt's green glare flashed at Alderheart, clearly insulted that any cat would hint he could be get sick in the first place. Embarrassed and trying to ease the tension, Alderheart lowered his gaze and told him quietly, "It won't take long."

Breezepelt glared at Alderheart with hostility and outrage. "Can't you see I'm busy working? I obviously am not sick! How can you be so mouse-brained?"

"Oh, sorry. I'll just go-" Alderheart took a step backwards, stunned by Breezepelt's harshness. Fury flashed in Jayfeather's eyes. He placed himself right in the path of Breezepelt and stopped Alderheart's retreat. His fur bristled as he spoke.

"This is not a time for you to be selfish. Breezepelt, do you want sickness to spread through the Clans? Check him anyway!" Jayfeather exploded. "On second thought, Alderheart you go check on the elders, queens, and kits. I'll do the warriors." He stared defiantly at Breezepelt, refusing to move a nudge.

All Breezepelt could do was glare at Jayfeather, while Alderheart quickly escaped the confrontation.

Meanwhile, Cinderheart was with Daisy and the other queens watching over the kits. There were many extra kits, which meant a lot of supervision. The den was too crowded, and it was as if the kits were bouncing from wall to wall in every direction.

One of them wailed with a big leap in the air, "I am ShadowClan, the strongest clan!"

Another one argued, "No SkyClan is the strongest, and I am leading a patrol to destroy you!"

They continued to argue which clan was strongest as they banged against each other, Queens, and the walls. Dovewing came out of the den with Tigerstar to escape from the chaos, or so it seemed.

A yell rumbled, overtaking the noise of the mischievous kits.

"I don't need anyone to check me!" Tigerstar protested, as Dovewing guided him over to Jayfeather away from the kits.

"Nobody wants greencough to spread in the camp, and you are coughing a lot," Dovewing meowed.

"So is Shadowsight!" Tigerstar argued.

"That's exactly my point. Jayfeather, could you check Tigerstar?", Dovewing asked. Tigerstar snorted but held still for Jayfeather.

"He has a fever," Jayfeather confirmed calmly.

"No I don't!" Tigerstar hissed. "I just-" He broke off choking in a coughing fit, and Dovewing's fur bristled, as he stumbled to the ground.

Jayfeather grabbed him by the scruff to the medicine den with Dovewing following after him, trying to peer at her mate. "Is he going to be alright?" The panic inside her was clearly rising.

"You will get sick if you keep following a sick cat!" Jayfeather

turned at her abruptly and hissed, annoyance clouded his blank blue gaze.

"Do we have any catmint to spare?" Shadowsight rasped, interrupting Jayfeather and Dovewing's conversation. "Mothwing and I have a bit of a cough."

"For StarClan's sake, it's nearly leafbare, and you ask me if we have spare catmint?! We could hardly find any herbs on our way here. What do you think?"

Jayfeather's anger was as sharp as the wind's cold-cutting lash. Dovewing could feel the anxiety and worry coming off him in waves. *He's losing it. He knows we are in great trouble.*

From the corner of the nursery, a panicked wail came out abruptly. A flash of grey fur bristled out of the opening, darting and looking each way. "Leafpool! Jayfeather! Somebody! Creamkit won't stop coughing!", Cinderheart cried.

Leafpool! Where are you?

Yellowfang was pushing her way through the crowds of furry bodies. The brown, starry medicine cat was no where to be found in the camp. *Why is Jayfeather the only one here? She's not in the nursery. She must be in the medicine den then.* Yellowfang stomped over to the medicine den searching for the she-cat. Her sharp, yellow fangs were showing as she let out a hiss from the entrance,

"For StarClan's sake, stop fretting over Crowstar, and get your tail over here! We have a disaster out here, and you are just staying in the medicine den! We need all medicine cats outside now, so we can collect the sick cats and separate them. Then we can focus on taking care of all the sick cats."

Leafpool ducked her head, seeming a little embarrassed, as she exited out of the medicine den swiftly. Yellowfang pointed her tail towards the front of the nursery entrance, where Cinderheart was carrying a still, coughing Creamkit in her jaws. Leafpool took Creamkit, staring down at him as if she was overwhelmed and couldn't think. She froze. Jayfeather looked at her horrified.

"Do something!" He snapped when Leafpool didn't move.

"I-" She hesitated and fumbled.

"What would you do if that was Crowstar?" Jayfeather asked, his patience wearing thin. He knew the only reason why his mother wouldn't be focusing now was because of her worry for Crowstar, and it really annoyed him. *We don't have time for another reunion during a time of emergency. Jessy and Bramblestar was enough. Why can no cat focus on what is important at a time like this?!*

Leafpool leapt into action, as if she heard exactly what he was saying. She snapped out of it and started working quickly.

"Leafpool! Alderheart!" Squirrelstar moaned, as she padded up to them. "Brambleclaw is-"

"Brambleclaw is sick!" Jessy interrupted, sobbing, coming to Squirrelstar's side.

Squirrelstar glared at Jessy outrageously. *How dare she speak for me, and she's not even his mate!* Her eyes burned silently.

Alderheart pushed his way over, his eyes wide as he stared at his father slouched in the middle of the camp. "Where's the catmint? I need it immediately."

"It's finished!" Leafpool almost shrieked when she answered. "I used the last of it on Creamkit, Skykit, and Cinderheart." All the medicine cats could feel the panic in her voice she was trying to contain.

Alderheart just stared at her. His nerves were about to fly.

"Cinderheart and Skykit aren't even sick!" Mothwing rasped angrily as she entered the clearing. She carried a small pile of herbs across the camp to the medicine den.

"They are now!" Leafpool retorted with a yell at her backside. Tensions were high among the cats.

When Mothwing returned back to the camp center, Willowshine

joined her. She whispered in an anxious voice, trying not to show her worry. "Have we got mallow?" she asked.

Mothwing just shook her head helplessly. "I can't find the rest of it! I tried, and I went searching, but it's not where it usually is. I think the wind has blown away a lot of the herbs. I also found many of them started to go bad because of the cold weather. They will freeze soon with the leafbare approaching. Maybe in a few days there will be the first snow fall."

A voice interrupted the two medicine cats.

"I saw Squirrelflight carrying some mallow," Jessy offered.

"Where is she?" Mothwing demanded. "What right does she have to collect it? She's not even a medicine cat!" Mothwing yelled exasperated.

Jessy looked around, then shrugged silently and indifferently, leaving Mothwing and Willowshine alone. "Loners!" Mothwing said under her breath. "They only make more problems. They shouldn't be allowed here in the first place."

By the evening, all the sick cats were in the medicine den, and the healthy cats were staying further away in another camp, but within the sight of the medicine den. Every cat knew that they had to protect the sick cats and patrol the area. The situation could not afford for every cat to be separated. Nothing about it was ideal, and there was a risk of a further attack from green cough, a risk from the shadow cat, and a risk of both.

Leafpool leaned over a still, feverish Crowfeather. Yellowfang glared at her, but a drop of sympathy briefly showed in her eyes. Willowshine moved quickly to each patient in the medicine den, checking, then moving to the next. There wasn't much space, and most of the herbs had finished. They were running out of every thing.

Alderheart nearly tripped over Jayfeather's paw and expected his mentor to snap at him. Instead, Jayfeather was staring at the sky silently. He didn't notice any one around him as he thought to

himself.

Earlier, I could have meowed for StarClan to help us, but now I can't even do that! How will all these cats survive without catmint?

His fur trembled silently as he panicked inwardly.

Chapter 5

Coughs shook the medicine den as cats fought for their lives. Some writhed in pain, while others withered away lifelessly. Tigerstar was not blinking, and his gaze was frozen on the ceiling of the medicine den. Occasionally, Dovewing would peer from the entrance of the medicine den to check on him, only to get a reprimanding glare from Jayfeather. She quickly backed away each time with a sigh, but Jayfeather couldn't stop her from trying to glance at her mate throughout the day.

Skykit and Creamkit cuddled together wrapped in each other's furry pelts, moaning in pain one after the other. Their high pitch squeaks scratched against the ears of all cats near them. Cinderheart was close by having a hard time staying awake. She was just as sick as her kits, but she suffered silently as she watched them with agony in her eyes.

Crowstar had not said a word the entire day. He was unresponsive. The medicine cats had tried to open his eyes to get him to drink water, but they were sealed shut.

Brambleclaw tossed and turned, coughing the most of all the cats. His neck would lunge back in tension and pain, only to pause and relax a moment later. Jessy's name came out of his mouth, as he murmured it many times and tossed with his sickness. There was a point in the afternoon where Jayfeather had to leave the medicine den because he could not stand the tom's groaning for his long-lost she-cat.

The air was stuffy and congested with sickness. Each medicine cat took a turn to leave and check the healthy cats, making sure the sickness didn't spread. Secretly though, they also left to just get fresh air. The den was a well of suffocating, heavy air ridden with sickness.

It had been one and a half days since the first sick cat had emerged, and while the camp was finished, cats were still falling sick every day. It was hard for patrols to manage to catch enough prey. Every cat was on edge, knowing that all clans, and even StarClan, was overwhelmed with despair.

"How many sick cats today?" Jayfeather asked Leafpool, rinsing his paws in a small pool of water. He tried to keep a normal tone as much as possible, but he held his breath as he waited for her response.

"Rootspring, Brackenfur, Birchfall, Oakfur, Nightcloud, Featherpelt, Breezepelt, Gorsetail, Daisy, and Jayclaw." Leafpool's voice wavered slightly. "Reedstar is having different Clan deputies make a makeshift medicine den, away from the healthy cats, but still nearby. We are running out of space in the original medicine den." She paused for a moment, alarmed by Jayfeather's silence. Then she continued, "At least no cat has died yet." Her amber eyes looked at him.

Yet!, huffed Jayfeather, as he stomped away angrily. He felt frustrated and helpless with the situation.

Leafpool watched him as he padded away, not sure of what she could say or do.

She was interrupted by Mothwing's presence, as the Riverclan medicine cat joined her next to the pool. Leafpool hardly noticed her approaching. She was staring at her reflection in the pool with a dazed expression.

Mothwing interrupted her thinking. "I managed to-" Mothwing coughed, "find some catmint that was not completely destroyed by the frost. Good thing too because it looks like it's about to snow."

Goosefeather was on a smooth, dark stone near the water resting and licking his paws. He groaned and plopped himself up at her words.

"Snow! That'll make all the moss in the forest damp! How will I make a more comfortable nes-" He paused. Leafpool, Yellowfang,

Willowshine, and Mothwing all glared at him. "I mean the herbs," he started again. "Yes, the herbs, of course. They might get cold. That would be terrible."

Willowshine sweet face turned sour, as she snorted. "If you're not going to do anything, you might as well make *other cat*'s nests, instead of your own. Try not to fall asleep in the first one you make!" Willowshine added with a roll of her eyes. Goosefeather padded away, sighing with his head turned downward and tail drooping.

*This is not what I expected my time in StarClan to be like. S*ilently he sighed again in his mind. *I should be resting and enjoying the perfection, the peace, after my time as a medicine cat, not starting all over again. I remember my nes-*

Jayfeather rolled his eyes as he padded right past him and stopped his train of thought. He was fuming as he joined the other medicine cats gathered around the pool. Alderheart had joined him to wash his paws.

Unable to hold his words any more, Jayfeather glared as Goosefeather's back as he watched him enter the medicine den. "It's bad enough Shadowsight's sick and can't do anything, but Goosefeather's perfectly fine, and he simply can't do a pawful of work!"

"He helped me gather a few feathers yesterday for Tigerstar's nest." Alderheart mumbled defensively. He didn't like the tension among the medicine cats.

Mothwing coughed again, and her paws trembled underneath her. All the medicine cats turned to her.

"Mothwing, you should get some rest. I'll wrap up the rest of the catmint. You should be with the other sick cats, so the greencough doesn't spread more. " Leafpool spoke to her with kind concern and a stern voice.

"You're sending a medicine cat away?" Jayfeather demanded as Mothwing padded wearily away. "At least have her take care of the

sick cats! We need all the paws we can get!" He grumbled in a disgusted tone.

"I think that it's also important that medicine cats rest if they are sick, so they do not get worse!" Leafpool countered sharply.

"Both of you, now is not the time." Yellowfang interfered calmly, deep in thought.

"You are right." Leafpool admitted. Both Leafpool and Jayfeather locked their gaze to each other, seeming to nod silently in agreement. "I think it's best we split up. Some of us should get back to the den to care for the sick cats, and others can check the healthy cats. It's important no one-"

Before Leafpool could finish, Hollyleaf's panicked meow echoed across the camp. She got closer and closer till she reached the pond. Her gaze was wary and fixated on Jayfeather.

"Jayfeather! Lionblaze is sick! I don't know what happened. You must come now and check him!"

Leafpool's eyes widened, and she nearly almost fell into the pond, getting control of her balance at the last minute. *I can't handle Crowstar and Lionblaze being sick at the same time. It is too much for me!*

Jayfeather remained calm, but retreated quickly to the medicine den. A few miniscule herbs were in his mouth as he hurried out to the clearing where Lionblaze had collapsed. Hollyleaf was near her brother, trying to check his breathing and trying her best to remember what she could of her training as a medicine cat long ago.

Jayfeather nudged her away. "Hollyleaf, this is not the time to be mouse-brained. You shouldn't risk your own health just because Lionblaze is sick. I will check him. Try to keep a distance." After examining his brother, Jayfeather took Hollyleaf aside and spoke to her quietly, so Lionblaze would not hear.

"Why didn't any one notice?" His blank eyes were as unpredictable

as the blue ocean. It was impossible for Hollyleaf to tell how bad the situation was. Her brother kept so much to himself. She yearned to ask him questions, but she feared the answers.

"He just collapsed suddenly!" Hollyleaf meowed emotionally. "He ate with all the other warriors. He was laughing. There was nothing wrong with him. I didn't even hear him cough."

"Someone help me carry him to the medicine den!" Jayfeather ordered.

"I'll co-" Needleclaw started, then her eyes glazed over and closed as she collapsed to the ground, her limbs jerking. Spasm after spasm, she wouldn't open her eyes, and her body whipped with tremors. Many cats nearby stared in alarm silently; they stopped moving, except for one. Rootspring's gaze was filled with dread as he jumped towards her direction. His eyes read the words *not again* as clear as glass.

"Needleclaw!" His face rubbed against her, nudging her, trying to move her out of her tremors. Rootspring gasped, his eyes wide with horror. The she-cat would not stop her spasms, and she could not be awakened. The lashes increased in intensity.

"Someone do something!" He choked out.

Yellowfang hurried over, but by the time she had reached her, Needleclaw had stopped moving. She was lying limply in the clearing for all the other cats to see. Horror was heard in waves of silence as not a single cat spoke.

The only cat who spoke was Rootspring. Disbelief and denial were clearly affecting him.

"Needleclaw? Is she okay?" Rootspring whispered. He stared at Yellowfang with a fearful spark in his eyes, but she didn't answer. She just looked at Needletail without showing any emotion. Rootspring darted back towards his sister in protest.

Leafpool tried to make him retreat, but he fought to reach the lifeless body of his sister. He thrashed and wailed, nearly knocking

over Leafpool, until three other warriors had to pull him back into the warriors' den. Most of the cats left the clearing or bowed their heads in grief.

"No...not after Bristlefrost!" Rootspring shrieked from the warriors' den. His voice echoed through the clearing and reached every cat. Its hollow ache burned with sickness and grief.

All the medicine cats had gathered too late in a half moon circle around the body of Needletail. Jayfeather stood next to Leafpool, motionless. His eyes closed tightly. He remembered how he felt when he had lost Hollyleaf, as the pain of Rootspring re-opened the old wound. The total, complete helplessness threatened to shake him.

I must remain focused for the Clans. What is in the past does not matter now.

Opening his eyes, he sensed the camp was blurry. Something was off. He could tell most of the cats, oddly enough, had retreated to their dens in grief because it was unusually quiet. For the first time in many moons, the pain of one Clan was felt by all. There was a brief unity in the silence. An utter of defeat swished through the air along with a blast of leafbare wind.

Jayfeather stiffened. There was something else too moving in the wind. It was going straight to the medicine den with the sick cats. Jayfeather could feel its cold darkness falling over the medicine den and swallowing it.

*No! H*e leapt to his paws.

There was no cat who had noticed the disturbance except for Jayfeather. He yelled to get the other cats' attention, but he decided not to wait for them.

"Stop it!" Jayfeather yowled and cried out in alarm, thrusting his way through the mossy, bumpy camp of the RiverClan cats, tripping on rocks and twigs as he tried to move faster.

None of the medicine cats are in the medicine den! His mind was full

of dread. Jayfeather knew all the medicine cats were outside after Needleclaw and Lionblaze had fallen ill.

"What is it?" One cat asked from his den.

"What's wrong Jayfeather?" A medicine cat asked, he couldn't focus on which one.

"There's an attack!- Blackness!-" A warrior yowled.

"Every warrior out now!" Deputies and Clan leaders tried to scramble to the den as fast as possible.

Some of them followed Jayfeather's gaze in horror, shooting to their paws, but not fast enough.

Jayfeather knew he was too late. He knew at that time, one defenseless, sick cat was being killed.

The shadow slipped inside, and a loud, bellowing screech of pain shattered the camp.

I don't have time for my blindness to get in my way right now! I can't move fast enough because of all the pebbles on the RiverClan territory! Not now!

He tripped again, as he thought to himself, hating his blindness more than ever. He had almost reached the entrance to the den.

I have to get to the medicine den before another cat is hurt!

He burned with rage and fury that quickly melted when he reached the entrance. His unsheathed claws relaxed.

Time passed like a flash of lightning. It was over too soon.

Jayfeather reached the medicine den with some warriors on the hunt outside of the medicine den. Several warriors entered the medicine den to check for the enemy, completely forgetting about the sickness. The medicine cats followed after Jayfeather too, their claws unsheathed.

But it wasn't enough. It was gone. The medicine den was empty except for the sick cats.

The shadow cat had attacked. It had been so quiet, so fast that no other cat had noticed. There was a hush of death in the medicine den. Jayfeather smelled the scent lingering over Crowstar and rushed to the tom's side. His eyes were open, frozen in terror.

"Leafpool! Come quick! Crowstar has lost a life!"

Chapter 6

Feathertail and Leafpool both burst into the medicine den after Jayfeather's call.

"Where's Crowstar?!" Leafpool demanded, her eyes wide, darting and her fur bristling.

How could this have happened? I should not let myself get distracted by Lionblaze and Needletail. All cats need me now.

She knew that Crowstar's death meant much more to her. Both her and Feathetail were companions in their loyalty to Crowstar. They could not help but meet each others' gazes with the same thought. The same anxiety spread in their expressions. Their eyes locked together, asking the same question silently, wordlessly to each other.

Feathertail was the first to move near to Crowstar, while Leafpool remained somewhat frozen, horrified. Feathertail crouched beside Crowstar mournfully and dared to ask the question both cats were thinking- this time aloud. She hesitated first, then the words came out.

"Without StarClan, how will he come back for his next life?" Her voice quivered. "Where will his soul go?"

Nightcloud, with her squinty, fierce eyes, glared at the two-she cats, as she coughed beside Breezepelt.

No cat answered Feathertail's question though. She looked around at all the cats' silence, continuing, "At least his spirit should be alive, right? Cloudtail's spirit came after he died." Feathertail

meowed hopefully with a dropped voice at the end. The silence of the cats around her was a blunt strike to her hope.

Jayfeather responded to her curtly. "Cloudtail's spirit came right away. It has been some time since Crowstar died, and his spirit hasn't come." He was grateful he could not see the eyes of the she-cats because the doom he felt from their sorrow was already too heavy in the air, suffocating him. He wanted to leave the den as soon as possible to clear his mind, but he didn't feel it was the right time, not when so many cats needed him.

Leafpool bowed her head, grief glistening in her eyes. She could not speak. All the medicine cats were now gathered in the den, talking to one another in hushed voices about the day's events. Several warriors also stood at the entrance trying to gain information from Jayfeather, as he remained calm and clear, unfolding the sorrows of the day to them. Leafpool couldn't focus on the exact words that were flying around her. She was too busy speaking to herself in grief.

I feel so powerless. Waves of grief tumbled and burned her soul, in layer upon layer, peeling away at her heart. *I want to save his soul, but what can I do? Nothing is working. StarClan's powers are empty now. And yet, I can't give up.* Something caught in her chest as she realized what she needed to do. Her ears pricked at her own words.

I can't give up on Crowstar. I have to try to find him. I waited so many moons, thinking of him, trying to protect him, and helping him so he could be the best leader for his Clan and live a full life. I will not let all of it be in vain. I have to find him again. I have to be able to be with him one day, even if it is only in death. There must be a way to find his spirit. Maybe I can sneak back to the Moonpool later this evening when all the cats have retired to their dens. If I could just go to StarClan without any cat noticing, I might be able to find him there. He might be trapped, and he needs me.

Leafpool stopped suddenly. She forgot all her words that were pouring out. For when she looked down upon Crowstar, she saw his whiskers quiver then pause. Slowly, but surely, the proud tom had some small movements.

Her gaze cleared, and she jumped towards him, forgetting about all the other cats around them. "Crowstar?" She whispered in a small, hopeful voice, getting closer to his face.

Crowstar's eyes drifted open slightly. His eyes fell upon Leafpool before any other cat. "Leafpool!" he cried. His eyes were dazed, but they had a passionate fire lit in them. The two cats rejoiced in each other with their glittering gazes, forgetting all around them.

Feathertail burst to her paws to join them. "He's alive!" She exclaimed, her fur bushing up happily.

Crowstar gazed warmly at Feathertail with relief.

Nightcloud rolled her eyes at the scene. "In case you all forgot, he was *my* mate." She muttered arrogantly, but no cat heard her. Her sickness would not allow her to speak louder, much to the relief of Crowstar, Leafpool, and Feathertail.

Their short time of happiness was cut by Jayfeather suddenly, as he shouldered his way through the crowds of cats in the medicine den. The atmosphere had improved, and there was a slightly warm feeling radiating in the den. It could only be described as hope. Jayfeather felt it, but he didn't want to be distracted by it. He knew he had to find out more about the shadow cat before he or she struck again.

He padded briskly to Crowstar's nest and got straight to the point "You were killed by the shadow. Did you see who it was? Do you remember what happened to you?"

A deathly silence hit the hope that was once in the den. All waited in anticipation for Crowstar's response.

He sat up, all signs of sickness gone from him as he looked around the room with a clear, alert gaze. He suddenly remembered the situation and that many cats were watching him with the she-cats. *Being a Clan leader always must come first.* He reminded himself solemnly, resentful that he had forgotten his duties in the moment.

"I felt a shadow strike me in my nest. I did not see any cat. I just felt

a darkness- it was very swift. Then I woke up in StarClan's hunting grounds." He continued with a rumbling voice. "But it was all wrong. The trees were withered and black with no leaves, and the ground was covered in ash and soot. As I padded through trying to find my way, I felt something sharp underneath one of my paws. I checked it, and I found a sharp, glowing pebble had pierced it. It was jagged as if it had been broken. When I looked up, I saw a dark shadow rising over me. It had returned, but this time, it was planning on swallowing me whole, like it was trying to catch me. Then I woke up here."

Crowstar cleared his throat after speaking with a slight cough, and Leafpool blinked anxiously at him. "I'll get you some feverfew."

Willowshine shook her head across the medicine den, disheartened. "There's no feverfew. I think it finished."

Leafpool blinked in surprise at Willowshine. "That can't be true. I just gathered some this morning. It can't have finished yet."

From the entrance of the medicine den, a curious Jessy peered in with an interested expression on her face. "I saw Squirrelstar carrying some herbs. Maybe it was the feverfew." Her tone was indifferent as she shrugged.

Leafpool frowned in response. "But Squirrelstar isn't sick. She doesn't need it."

"Maybe she was bringing it to Brambleclaw." Jessy meowed.

From his nest near Leafpool, Brambleclaw shook his head, his glazed, glassy eyes confused. "Squirrelstar didn't give me any herbs. In fact, I have not seen her at all today."

"I think instead of guessing and wasting our time, I will go speak to Squirrelstar about this." Jayfeather's grey pelt whisked past the other medicine cats, and he left the den. Several medicine cats followed him.

"I will wait here." Willowshine said kindly. "Someone needs to stay with the sick cats."

"Don't worry, Willowshine, we have also placed a warrior in front of the medicine den. You will be safe to take care of the sick cats." Yellowfang assured her. "We will be back soon."

"Why would I take any herbs?" Squirrelstar was surprised as she stared at the medicine cats gathered around her and the warriors peering at her in the camp. She had just caught a mouse for Brambleclaw, and she was dropping it off at the den entrance. " I'm not a medicine cat." Seemingly unaware, she continued, "Does Brambleclaw still having a fever? How is he today?"

"He is improving," Leafpool hesitated, embarrassed. "Actually, I wanted to ask you if you took herbs because Jessy said she saw you carrying feverfew." Leafpool explained.

Squirrelstar's fur bristled as she stared at the cats surrounding her in front of the medicine den. "I don't even know what that is!"

"It's a white flower with petals. It's for sore throats and-" Mothwing began.

"I haven't carried any herbs today!" Squirrelstar protested, interrupting her.

From the inside of the medicine den, Brambleclaw's voice could be heard. "I did see a familiar she-cat carrying some sort of flowery herb."

Squirrelstar glared in his direction, stunned. "How could you accuse me of stealing herbs?"

"Nobody said you stole them. We are just trying to figure out where they went." Jayfeather narrowed his eyes.

"Squirrelstar would never steal herbs." Leafpool protested, looking at her son.

"Unless she was working for the shadow cat." Barkface countered, and Squirrelstar looked shocked, frozen with hurt.

"I'm a loyal ThunderClan warrior, and you're taking a rogue's word over mine just because a few herbs go missing!" Squirrelstar's tail

lashed with fury.

"Jessy isn't just a rogue!" Brambleclaw yelled from the medicine den, but no one listened.

"We could check Squirrelstar's nest." Yellowfang suggested calmly. "Feverfew has a strong scent, and if she had it, the scent will be on her nest."

"I'm sure she didn't steal any herbs." Leafpool reassured everyone. glancing over at Squirrelstar warmly.

When they entered the dimly lit den, Jessy frowned. "I'm sure I saw her carrying herbs. I can't be mistaken."

Squirrelstar shot daggers at Jessy and her claws unsheathed. Her breathing became heavy, as she prepared herself to lunge towards the rogue. It took every bit of effort to keep herself still.

"Which one is Squirrelstar's?" Runningnose asked. His quiet question reminded Squirrelstar that there were other cats watching, and she did not want to look guilty because of the rogue she-cat.

Sparkpelt looked up from where she was sleeping and pointed her tail sleepily to the nest beside her. "This one is her nest." She meowed drowsily.

"See?" Squirrelstar trudged angrily to her nest. I told you there is-" Squirrelstar began, but she was horrified at what she saw.

"Look!" Yellowfang mewed in astonishment.

All the medicine cats and the warriors in the den gathered around Squirrelflight's nest, trying to glimpse a view from so many cats. There were whispers of outrage and shock. Inside of her nest, there were a few bits of crumpled feverfew, appearing to have been trampled on and crushed.

"She is destroying the herbs Brambleclaw needs!" Jessy accused, her eyes wide with horror.

"The herbs *every* cat needs," Leafpool corrected her. "And she could

have just caught bits on her paw as she brought prey for Brambleclaw. Any one of us could have stepped on it and carried it into the camp with our paws, then Squirrelstar stepped on it."

"That could be true," Jayfeather mumbled thoughtfully. "There is only one way to tell." Jayfeather pushed his way to the feverfew while the other cats eyed him curiously. Then he sniffed it.

"Just as I thought, these are too fresh to have been caught on her paw. These were taken from the storage recently."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Kestrelflight asked, his eyes wide in astonishment. "Even if you were on bad terms with Brambleclaw, how could you do this to all the other sick cats?"

"I didn't steal anything!" Squirrelstar insisted stubbornly, backing away from the hostility building in the cats around her.

"Then why is there feverfew in your nest?" Jayfeather asked. His blue, blind gaze was fixed directly and unsettlingly on where Squirrelstar stood.

"I don't know why there are herbs in my nest, but I didn't take them! They were not there before." Squirrelstar's bushy tail thrashed, and her fur was bristling.

Leafpool stepped forward calmly, trying to clear the situation. She looked around at all the cats as she spoke. "We can't punish Squirrelstar or make assumptions until we have more details."

Firestar nudged his way between the medicine cats as he nodded. "We can just keep an eye on our herbs, and if anything else goes missing, then we can get more information about who is removing them."

The cats hesitantly agreed. Thornclaw rolled his eyes, and a few other warriors grumbled their complaints, but everyone went back to their duties eventually.

Staring at the entrance of the medicine den, Squirrelstar narrowed her eyes.

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Thornclaw, Heathertail, Oakheart, Needletail's spirit, Squirrelstar, and Hawkwing all padded through RiverClan territory in an attempt to find prey. A scant layer of frost was just beginning to form on the ground. The trees hissed from the wind, bare from the vicious shaking.

"I'm telling you, fishing is easiest here." Oakheart meowed with his head high as he padded.

Hawkwing shook his head. "I'm sure it is, but we SkyClan cats prefer not to get our paws wet."

Oakheart shrugged. "Your choice."

Squirrelstar opened her jaws to taste the air. "I'm going to try to catch something closer to the WindClan border," she informed them.

Heathertail nodded, and Needletail added, "I'll try the ShadowClan border."

"We should be cautious while we hunt. We don't know what is out there." Squirrelstar's voice was very serious, and no cat could disagree with her. Squirrelstar and Needletail departed with very little words said between them.

Thornclaw remained, obstinately searching for prey near the bushes. He pounced on an unsuspecting water vole, finishing it off with a killing bite and lifting it to his jaws proudly. His moment of success was dampened though when he couldn't catch anything else.

Heathertail found two squirrels near a tree, and she padded briskly back to camp with satisfaction. All the warriors were pleased for the most part with what they had found, despite the cold, unfamiliar territory.

Squirrelstar joined them in the camp. Her eyes gleamed as she placed a rabbit, almost as big as her bushy tail, on the prey pile. Then she added a plump mouse to it. Jessy narrowed her eyes in

the distance as she watched her.

The warriors retreated to rest after the hunting patrol, and the camp seemed fairly quiet. Squirrelstar settled in her nest, pleased with the results of her efforts. But something in her wasn't satisfied, and her pelt itched with uneasiness.

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"Thief!" The words rang in Squirrelstar's ears suddenly, and she opened her eyes to find Thornclaw glaring down at her with several warriors behind him.

"I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding." Leafpool meowed hurriedly coming to Squirrelstar's side quickly.

"What's going on?" Squirrelstar blinked sleep from her eyes, still in her nest.

"Don't pretend like you don't know!" Thornclaw hissed.

"We all know you did it!" Dustpelt added. The hostility was reawakened in the warriors' den. The cats in their nests looked drowsily on as the commotion increased.

"Done *what*?" Squirrelstar asked confused.

"Our last stocks of growing catmint were found crushed by the WindClan border." Leafpool explained patiently. "We're sure you didn't do it, but since you were in that area, perhaps you saw something while you were there?" Leafpool eyed her sister supportively.

"Speak for yourself!" Thornclaw roared, as he placed himself in front of Squirrelstar's nest. "Even a blind cat could tell she's guilty!"

Jayfeather growled, and Thornclaw's ears pricked. "The point is, she's been destroying our herbs! She's probably aiding the shadow cat, or she is the shadow cat!"

Squirrelstar's eyes flared. "I haven't done anything!" Her eyes burned into Thornclaw, and in response, his fur raised as he fumed.

"You went on a hunting patrol along the WindClan border where the crushed catmint was found. Earlier today, we found trampled feverfew in your nest, and now you want us to believe you aren't guilty? Unlikely!" Dustpelt mewed haughtily.

Squirrelstar's eyes softened with disappointment. "You were my mentor, Dustpelt. How could you accuse me of such a thing? And I hunted! That is all I did. My catch is still on the prey pile."

"Let's all think about this and stop acting like hot-headed mouse-brains." Jayfeather interrupted. "Do you really think Squirrelstar would steal the herbs and leave all these traces to make her look gui-."

"You can keep your nonsense to yourself, Jayfeather, but your words do not change anything." Thornclaw interrupted. "We have all noticed that since Brambleclaw found Jessy, she has been acting distracted, frustrated, and angry. She's obviously so upset with the situation that she is trying to punish him by making him more sick, taking away his herbs, and hurting the rest of the sick cats for her own benefit!"

Squirrelstar lashed her tail. "That's not true! I would never harm so many cats for such a mouse-brained reason! And besides, I do not care about Jessy!" A touch of hurt was in her voice. "I have worked very hard since we set up camp. I am not distracted at all, and I have done all my duties." She glared at Thornclaw and Dustpelt.

"Squirrelstar is an honorable warrior-" Firestar started.

"Yes, she would not hurt Brambleclaw any more than I would," added Sparkpelt.

"It's impossible-there has to be another reason why this is happening." Alderheart murmured in a quiet voice.

"Says her kin!" Scowled Thonclaw.

Sandstorm glared at Thornclaw and Dustpelt. "You can't accuse a clanmate of trying to harm *entire Clans* based on a few crushed herbs!"

Reedstar frowned. He went to stand next to Sandstorm and looked at her. "I fear it *is* suspicious though."

"Let us try to find the answers we are looking for calmly and reasonably. This is a serious accusation. We should have more cats guard the medicine den to make sure no other herbs are taken." Firestar shot Squirrelstar a meaningful look.

Crowstar nodded. "And maybe we should have cats guard Squirrelstar too."

Leafpool looked at Crowstar, offended and hurt. "How could you accuse Squirrelstar of such a thing?" she gasped.

"This will prove her innocence," Crowstar shrugged indifferently, although Squirrelstar could have sworn she saw him blink apologetically at Leafpool.

"I don't need a cat following me around, but if it means you all will finally believe me, then fine." Squirrelstar sighed frustrated.

"Do it."

Chapter 7

It had been several days. Brambleclaw, although weak, was able to leave the medicine den. He still had a faint cough, but Alderheart deemed it was safe for his father to return to the elders' den.

He was not going out much in the day. He preferred to leave the den at night, enjoying the quiet of the evening. Only the crickets were heard, and a few squeaks of mice. It was during these evenings that Brambleclaw had time to think to himself.

His life had changed so much since he had found Jessy. After the death of Ashfur, he had retired to the elders' den and given up on most of his life. The trauma of Ashfur had drained some spark out of him, and he couldn't get it back. Now that Jessy was with him, the tabby tom had changed. He felt different, as if there was some hope, and he could start fresh.

He sat munching on a squirrel under the cold blanket of a foggy sky. He could hardly see anything around him, but he heard everything with pricked ears.

How is Jessy going to affect my relationship with Squirrelstar? Should I let it? Does it really matter to her if I find another mate?

His thoughts paused. He heard the prey rustling about further away, as the fog continued to grow like a thick smoke around him.

"Brambleclaw-"

Brambleclaw turned in the other direction. It was Jessy. *She looks so lonely*.

"This is the first time I have seen out of the elder's den." She padded over to him to rest beside him. "It's good to see you. I am so relieved that you were finally able to leave the medicine den. I was

very worried about you." She began to lick her paws.

"Well, several of the cats were able to leave the medicine den, not just me. Some cats are just able to recover from greencough better than others."

She looked at him innocently. "Brambleclaw, what you went through was more than any other cat! I mean, Crowstar was attacked and killed. But you were being hurt by a cat, targeted, many times, and we couldn't even stop her!" She sighed. "We tried to, but not enough ears would listen."

Brambleclaw's head popped up, alert. "What do you mean? I don't remember any cat trying to hurt me in the medicine den. Did it happen when I was very ill?"

"No cat tried to hurt you specifically. But she tried to stop you from getting herbs." She was very confident in her speech. "It all started when I saw Squirrelstar taking the feverfew from the medicine den. I told the other cats I saw her, and you even said you saw a she-cat's figure, but they wouldn't listen to me. Then after that, the catmint you needed was found trampled on where Squirrelstar had hunted. Again, she was trying to stop you from getting the herbs you needed. Thankfully, you still were able to get better, but it was too close-" She paused. "I still can't believe she got away with doing it."

Brambleclaw was thoughtful. "I do remember the she-cat, but I didn't see her face. I just thought she was a cat trying to give herbs to a sick cat. I can't believe it was Squirrelstar. I mean, it is possible you were mistaken, but then when the other herbs were trampled on in her hunting area, that is very suspicious."

"I am not mistaken." Jessy said sharply. "I know what I saw. You don't understand, Brambleclaw. Squirrelstar has tried to hurt you two times now, and she has gone unpunished. I am afraid that you are not safe. She will try again. What is there to stop here? She has so many of her kin backing up her statements. Even the cats who know she is guilty can do nothing. It's not safe for you here."

"Squirrelstar would not harm me." Brambleclaw's breath blew mist in the air. "That is extreme. She would never harm any cat. She

might betray me," he added thoughtfully, "but she won't hurt me. I am sure that when she had the herbs, she had them for a reason."

"Oh Brambleclaw," Jessy flew herself dramatically towards him. "I hope you are right. Let's not disagree now. I have so much to tell you about everything since we last met. There was so much time we lost when you were sick."

And with that, Jessy started rambling on about how she was adapting to clan life well, and she had many achievements within the camp. Later in the evening, both cats parted to retire to their nests.

"Stay safe," Jessy whispered to Brambleclaw softly.

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The dawn patrols began to gather outside in the camp, while the fog was just timidly starting to lift. It was rather noisy, considering that the hunting patrols were much larger than they used to be because all the Clans were together. Brambleclaw sighed as he thought about how peaceful ThunderClan camp was.

He stretched out his paws and peered out of the elders' den. Squirrelstar was speaking to a group of ThunderClan cats about patrols. Her ginger fur glowed in the fog. When she finished, she met Brambleclaw's gaze.

"Brambleclaw, I left you a mouse by your nest. I know you are not completely recovered, so I thought it might be better for you if you don't come out in the cold and fetch from the prey pile."

"Thank you," purred Brambleclaw. For a second, the two shared a warm glance similar to what they use to, before Squirrelstar darted out for patrols suddenly.

Brambleclaw happily retired back to his nest. He didn't like the way the fog felt on his pelt- cold and wet. He found his mouse, unusually large, placed right next to his nest just as Squirrelstar had said. He gathered the prey in his claws then stopped.

How- Is that what I think it is? It can't be.

He dropped the mouse suddenly, terrified. The mouse was stuffed to the brim with death berries, and he had nearly touched it.

He backed away in the den.

Squirrelstar! She is the one who brought me the mouse. She is- I never thought I would think this. His fury continued to build. *She is trying to kill me! Jessy is right! I am no longer safe. It's just like when Ashfur killed me. I trusted him, and he betrayed me too. Squirrelstar is no different. I thought I knew her, but I obviously don't. I have to get away from here, now!*

An angry Brambleclaw burst out of the elders' den almost bumping into Jessy. Alarm flashed in her eyes.

"What is wrong Brambleclaw? You are shaking." The she-cat had never seen Brambleclaw's eyes with such a ferocious glare before.

"I need to speak with you- outside the camp." He looked around, but the camp was not crowded. The few cats in the clearing were too busy to notice them as they left.

"What is wrong, Brambleclaw? Please, you are really scaring me." They had moved further along the icy, glassy river away from the ears of other cats.

"I did not believe you when you told me how Squirrelstar tried to hurt me. But then this morning, she tried to kill me!" He was almost too hysterical to explain properly what happened in his rage, remembering his events with Ashfur too well.

"I am not safe. What will she do next? What if next time she tries to stuff deathberries down my mouth when I am asleep? I don't know what to do to be safe!"

Jessy was calm, but surprised. She paused. "I think the first thing we should do is tell the other cats. It's important they know that Squirrelstar is trying to hurt you. Maybe then Squirrelstar will be punished for her deeds, and you will be safe." She said in a sad tone.

"You are right. Every cat must know about this."

"I will go hunt, and we can speak latee when I come back." The she-cat suggested.

Brambleclaw returned to the camp, while Jessy went out to hunt. His ragged voice boomed strangely as he glanced around nervously.

"All cats, I must speak with all cats." He was out of breath and unnerved.

The cats in the camp stopped what they were doing, and most of them came out of their dens in curiosity.

"I have been silent long enough." Brambleclaw started. He glared at Squirrelstar, and she stared back in surprise.

"Squirrelstar has been doing strange things. All of you cats are aware of this. First, she stole herbs, then the medicine cats found herbs trampled on where she had hunted. Today though, she did something unforgiveable. Something no clan leader should do. In all my moons with her, I never imagined she would do something like this."

Squirrelstar came toward him as if they were the only two cats in the camp. All cats were staring at the mates. "Brambleclaw, what are you-"

"Don't say my name. Don't act like you are innocent. You know exactly-"

"No I don't!" Squirrelstar began to raise her voice.

"You tried to kill me!" Brambleclaw lashed out hotly.

All the cats gasped.

"How-" Squirrelstar's words faltered. "Why would I do that?"

"You gave me a mouse full of deathberries! You need to be removed right now as Clan leader! You broke the warrior code many times. First by stealing the herbs, destroying them, and then trying to kill me. Something has happened to you, and you are no longer-"

Squirrelstar bristled and fluffed her fur out in anger. Her bushy tail thrashed back and forth with rage. "I did not give you a mouse with deathberries. The mouse I gave you was the best catch from the prey pile, and it had no death berries in it. Not a single one." She said stubbornly, her green eyes filled with flames.

Firestar jumped forward to stand before the two mates. "Brambleclaw, Squirrelstar, I think we should discuss this as a Clan before someone gets hurt."

"I will get hurt if you do not stop her!" roared Brambleclaw.

"I know I am not a ThunderClan cat," Reedstar interjected, "but I think Squirrelstar's actions have been very suspicious as of late. I propose that we keep her in the den for some time with someone to guard her. If anything else happens to Brambleclaw, then we will know for sure that she is not the one behind these incidents."

"No," Squirrelstar challenged, "I will not sit in a den all day being watched like a kit. It's not fair I am punished before there is evidence against me."

"There is plenty of evidence against you!" Brambleclaw yowled in response.

"Brambleclaw, I know you are upset." Leafpool began. Brambleclaw rolled his eyes at her.

 "Please, just give me a chance to speak. Deathberries are not something every cat knows how to find. I am not sure if Squirrelstar knows how to find them in this weather in the first place. Second of all, any cat could have placed the deathberries in the mouse while all the elders were sleeping."

Thornclaw and Dustpelt exchanged glances and snorted disgustedly.

Crowstar padded next to Reedstar thoughtfully. "We need more evidence before we punish Squirrelstar. I agree with Reedstar's idea."

"I don't agree with any of you." Brambleclaw sneered. "How many times does she have to get caught before she is finally punished! I

will not sit around and wait to find out!" He snapped, lashing his tail and padding away to the forest bitterly.

"Squirrelstar-" Firestar began.

"I don't want to speak anymore of this. I am a Clan leader." She spoke with anger, but her voice was broken with heartache. She met the eyes of every cat in the camp. "In order to punish me, there must be sufficient evidence against me. This shouldn't be taken lightly."

"But Squirrelstar, right now the only way to prove your innocence is to see what happens when you are under watch." Jayfeather spoke wisely.

"I have been under watch now since the last incident! Tree has been hovering over me everywhere I go. Tree, have you seen me do anything suspicious?"

"No," Tree said with confidence. "All I have seen her do is be a Clan leader to her Clan. Nothing more."

"I have enough watching." Squirrelstar said firmly. "I propose that we increase the security around every part of the camp. We have a patrol in every den and in front of every den. We will take turns. If I am seen by any cat on patrol doing something wrong, I will step down as Clan leader."

Leafstar came to Squirrelstar's side. "I agree with Squirrelstar. If we all make accusations towards Clan leaders without evidence at a time like this, it could be detrimental to our Clans. Accusations are not enough. We need to keep an eye on every area of the camp. We have not had any watch except for Tree and a patrol in front of the medicine den. Tree said Squirrelstar has not done anything usual."

"Yes," Leafpool began, "If Squirrelstar was collecting deathberries for the mouse, it would be hard for Tree not to notice something unusual with her. She would have to take certain precautions in order to carry them. It is not that simple."

Crowstar listened intently. "I agree then. Let us start watch patrols

on the medicine den, Squirrelstar, the elders' den. I also think we should have watch during hunting patrols too. These cats should not hunt. They will just watch the hunting cats. If we have watch on every part of the camp and Squirrelstar, we should be able to find out who is behind all of this."

Outside the camp, Brambleclaw marched through the marsh, almost tripping over frosty boulders in his rage.

"Brambleclaw! What's wrong?" Jessy looked up from where she was crouching.

Brambleclaw shook his head exasperated, crazily. "I-It's just like you said!" He ranted, unable to speak properly through his fury.

Jessy draped her tail comfortingly over Brambleclaw's shoulders. "Did nobody believe that Squirrelstar stuffed your mouse with deathberries?"

"They just kept defending her, and-" Brambleclaw paused. "Jessy, I never told you there was a mouse stuffed with deathberries. I just said Squirrelstar tried to kill me."

Jessy blinked innocently. "I could hear you meowing about it outside, since I wasn't too far from the clearing at the time." Jessy's gaze softened. "Don't you trust me? "

Brambleclaw shook his head quickly. "I was just confused, Jessy. I know you would never try to hurt me." Brambleclaw blinked lovingly at Jessy for a moment, then the rage and fear in his gaze returned. "But what am I to do now?! Squirrelstar and the Clans have all turned on me, and I am no longer safe!"

Jessy sat down, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps..."

Brambleclaw looked eagerly at her.

"Perhaps if the Clans are no longer safe, then we should stay away from them till it is safe for you. Squirrelstar is clearly trying to kill you, and with the Clans supporting her, along with the danger of the shadow cat still lurking about, perhaps it would be safer to live outside of the Clans. There are too many dangerous aspects of Clan

life right now."

Brambleclaw frowned, thoughts racing inside of his head. It was hard and slow for him to process the idea of leaving the Clans for any length of time, especially an indefinite amount. "I suppose I would be safer away from the Clans now. Squirrelstar wouldn't be able to track me through this weather." He meowed slowly. "And the shadow cat is targeting the Clans, not loners. But I don't know if I feel comfortable living apart from my Clan."

Jessy nodded encouragingly. "That's true what you say. I think you need to look at this as something temporary. What is most important to you right now?" She tilted her head as she looked at him.

"I just want to be safe. I can't- can't stand the idea of being unsafe." He stammered. "Ever since Ashfur, I have felt on edge, just waiting, knowing, something might happen to me again. I want to live and forget that feeling. Squirrelstar has relit every fear and brought it to life. Yes, I just want to feel safe." His eyes were tired, unstable with fatigue.

Slowly, Brambleclaw went onto his paws. "Then that must be the solution for now, to leave the Clans. Jessy, thank you! I feel better now that I have found a way to end this anxiety. Being in the camp was so suffocating. And I know I won't be lonely as long as you are with me. After all, it's temporary, just till the problems in the Clans calm down."

Brambleclaw touched noses with Jessy, a sense of relief washed over him.

"I'm just watching out for you," Jessy purred, her eyes sparkling from Brambleclaw's words.

The two padded through the snow, heading towards the RiverClan border, not sure of where they were going.

Two gleaming, black eyes- fathomless pits- watched their every step in anticipation.

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Chapter 8

Dovewing moved lightly on her paws in the medicine den, trying to quietly pad over to Tigerstar without Jayfeather noticing. She had just passed the entrance when she was interrupted.

"I may be blind, but I'm certainly not deaf," Jayfeather mewed sarcastically. His mouth was full of herbs he was chewing down to bits. He didn't glance in her direction as he worked.

Dovewing sighed. "I know you have the hearing of a bat, Jayfeather. I was just checking on Tigerstar."

"He's not very stable now," Jayfeather meowed bluntly, "But even if he loses a life, he's still got plenty more. There's no reason for you to be so upset."

Dovewing blinked anxiously at Jayfeather. Her worry was swelling in waves. "You really think it might come to that?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He really might lose a life?"

The dim lighting of the medicine den seemed to flash as Dovewing asked the question.

"I just said that. Why aren't you listening to me?" Jayfeather retorted impatiently, his tail-tip twitching to and fro in agitation.

Sensing the nervous she-cat wasn't going to leave soon, Jayfeather tried to calm the situation. "Shadowsight is getting better now. He was able to move about the camp today. He said he felt much better after getting fresh air."

Dovewing's ears twitched, and she sounded relieved as she spoke. "That's good. Is he back to his medicine cat duties?"

Jayfeather nudged her to the exit. "He is outside getting some prey from the fresh kill pile. Why don't you go ask him about everything you want to know and leave me to work in peace? We don't need more sick cats, and I have a lot of work I need to finish."

Dovewing looked at where Tigerstar was crumpled up in his nest. His sides were hardly moving without much breath in his body. She hesitated. "But Jayfeather, I haven't checked on Tigerstar. I just need to see him for a moment-"

Jayfeather glared at her with sightless blue eyes and interrupted her coldly. "*I'm* watching him."

Dovewing nodded slowly as she took a step outside. "Well, tell him to get better soon, and I-"

Jayfeather padded back inside the medicine den, his ears flicking irritably, not bothering to hear the rest of her words. "Mates!" He muttered to himself.

For a brief instance, he remembered Half-Moon- the way her bright eyes and shiny pelt glowed under the light of the moon. *How would I feel it was Half-Moon?* A sharp longing tugged at the blind tom.

I would be worried too, and I wouldn't leave her side, Jayfeather realized. I can't blame Dovewing after all. He sighed, suddenly lost in the memories of the beautiful she-cat, and the dreams they shared together.

A blast of cold air hit Jayfeather, startling him and disrupting his memories. There was something wrong in the medicine den. Sniffing the air, he realized it wasn't the shadow cat. Something solemn, heartbreaking, and more tender than the shadow cat. It was suddenly crushed.

His head turned quickly to glance over at Creamkit and Skykit where they were snuggled together. Their pelts mixed together as one in their embrace.

He could feel Creamkit's sour sick-tainted breath heaving, but Skykit was silent. Too silent.

Jayfeather nudged him, just to be sure, but he could feel it already.

Skykit was dead.

Jayfeather gently picked up the small kit by his scruff, then tried to pad quietly past Cinderheart's nest without waking her up.

She was still recovering from her sickness, and the news that one of her kits was dead would only worry her further, delaying her recovery. As Jayfeather tried to leave, a small voice squeaked.

"Where are you taking me? Why are there two of me?"

Jayfeather turned around to see Skykit's spirit standing on his paws. His fur was glossy and his eyes were shining brightly, full of kit-like excitement and naive wonder.

"You're a StarClan spirit now," Jayfeather murmured. "I'm going to go take your body for the other cats to bury it."

Skykit's expression dropped. His ears turned down. "What about Creamkit? I can't be without him. And I want to talk to Cinderheart. I can't just leave her! Please let me see my mother." His voice turned into a wail, nearly a hysterical sob.

Before Jayfeather could reply, Tigerstar's head shot up suddenly from his nest, like a snake about to strike. His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but a cracked gasp was the only thing that came out before he collapsed back into his nest.

Jayfeather put down Skykit's body and hurried over to Tigerstar, putting his ear over Tigerstar. He dreaded what he would find.

There was no pulse.

"Leafpool! Littlecloud! Flametail! Shadowsight! Tigerstar has lost a life!" Jayfeather yelled.

By the time the other medicine cats had returned, Tigerstar's eyes were open again. He stared at the medicine cats with a blank gaze.

Shadowsight leaned over his father anxiously, his eyes enlarged.

"Did the shadow cat attack you?"

"No."

Jayfeather interfered. "He died of sickness, Shadowsight. Did you see StarClan's territory after your passing?"

Tigerstar frowned. "Yes, I did. It was not what I expected. There were no more stars glittering in the sky, and the trees were blackened. The floor was covered in ash, and the bushes and plants were shriveled. There was a sharp, glowing stone under my paw. I felt the pain of stepping on it, then I found myself here."

The medicine cats all shared glances. It sounded all too familiar.

"Did the shadow cat try to kill you?" Jayfeather urged, his head tilted to one side.

Tigerstar shook his head. He was still somewhat stunned by the ordeal.

"We have to keep this quiet for now." Jayfeather insisted

"It's doesn't change anything," sighed Leafpool helplessly.

"We still don't know what is wrong with StarClan," added Yellowfang thoughtfully, finishing Leafpool's last words.

Tigerstar rose to leave the medicine den, and just as he did, Breezepelt nearly smashed himself into him and collided. "Nightcloud!" His voice was breathless and trembling as he dragged his mother by the scruff. "She just collapsed suddenly, and she's not breathing!"

The medicine cats all looked to each other, knowing that the sickness still plagued the camp just as much as the shadow loomed over it.

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Brambleclaw padded beside Jessy through the mesh of frost on the forest floor, a mix of marble tiles of white and brown. The chill in

the air was growing bitter, and Brambleclaw wondered how much longer they would be able to find prey easily.

Their pelts brushed as they moved onwards towards ThunderClan camp. Brambleclaw had suggested the idea. It was the closest place to home for him, and if he could not be with his Clan, at least he could sleep in his familiar nest. He knew Jessy wasn't too excited about the idea. She much rather preferred roaming. But after discussing the weather for some time, he tried to persuade her that it would be safer for them to settle in one place during leaf-bare.

"You'll love it." Brambleclaw promised as he moved forward with anticipation. Jessy remained silent as she followed along.

They padded side by side climbing over boulders and crossing through ShadowClan territory to get over to ThunderClan territory. Being in the dark pine trees of ShadowClan made Brambleclaw shiver, and he hurried to leave, quickening his pace. There was some unease he felt, but he couldn't put his paw exactly on it. Jessy didn't seem to sense it.

It seems she is confident everywhere she goes, he thought to himself in admiration.

Pushing his way through the thorns and clumps of gorse bushes at the edge of the hollow, he went in front of Jessy, stepping into his old camp with pride. A well of memories, most of them good, warmed his heart.

It looks just like I remember it.

There was the same large rock perfect for sunning and the hanging, white tipped ferns over the elders den to provide shelter from snow and rain. As Brambleclaw looked closer, he felt there was something haunting in the camp though. It wasn't like before.

A scent!

He whipped his head around, inhaling a smell that he only knew could mean one thing: danger. Slowly, with fierce intensity, a huge black and white badger glared at him from the hollow tree, and

from inside the dens, more badgers peered out, filling the camp with hostility. Their sharp teeth flared at the two cats.

"Run!" Brambleclaw exploded and leapt backwards as Jessy crouched low, her eyes wide and fur bristling, somewhat in shock.

"There are too many of them! We can't fight them off! Hurry we must come quick!"

The lead badger let out a hollow howl and thundered forward, claws unsheathed and teeth bared. Several of the other badgers followed it eagerly. Their voices were raspy and blood-curdling.

Brambleclaw let Jessy run ahead of him, launching himself after her to keep her safe, but it was too late. As he turned his back, the badger lunged on him, swiping with its claws in a frenzy, leaving Brambleclaw pinned down, face down into the frost. The badger swiped one final blow to Brambleclaw's ear causing him to let out a howl in agony.

The badger's white fur was stained red with his blood. Its eyes were full of hazy vengeance, and a hint of pleasure. Jessy had stopped, staring, horrified. The blood-thirsty badger looked up at her, immediately lunging towards her, giving Brambleclaw just enough time to move as it leapt off of him.

The two cats fled before the badger could catch up with them. Part of Brambleclaw's ear remained behind. They continued running. The burning in his ear stung his face. With a shiver, he knew of only one place he could go now.

Blood continued to drip down one side of his face. The pain pierced all his head, but there was something bothering him even more.

Jessy leaned over him. "Brambleclaw! Your ear!"

Suddenly, he realized he could hardly hear Jessy. Her voice was weak, as if it were far, far away. *What has happened to me?*

Brambleclaw shuddered, shaking as reality seeped into his body, chilling it with its final freeze.

"We should never have left the Clans," He whispered shakily. "What have I done? This is why cats should not be in the forest alone. This is why we always stay together as a Clan- to be stronger! I am such a mouse-brain!" His fury with himself started to swell up as they raced away from the old camp.

Jessy licked him soothingly. "But we're safe from Squirrelflight now. That's what you wanted. I'm sure we can find some herbs around her to help. Maybe I can find some poppy seeds." Her eyes glanced around at the silent forest.

Brambleclaw shook his head, not noticing her knowledge of medicine and simply not caring. "No Jessy, " he said sternly. "Herbs are not enough. We can't do this on our own. We need a Clan to protect us. In all my life as a warrior, I have realized that the forest is full of danger, and when we are together as a Clan, we can fight off that danger. I am such a fool to forget all of that just because of a threat from a she-cat."

He said that calmly, but in his mind, he knew Squirrelstar's attempts on his life created a panic he couldn't control.

"I am going back to the Clans." He stated determinedly. "I have to be seen by a medicine cat. Don't you see Jessy, the Clan is so much more than Squirrelstar, you, or me!"

Jessy followed him, but she followed in silence. The words he echoed didn't satisfy her. She knew there was a better way for both of them, but she did not have the heart to argue with him when he looked so old, shaken, and covered in blood.

When they arrived at camp, they found the medicine cats were no where to be seen.

Firestar was the first to approach Brambleclaw, along with Crowstar, Leafstar, and Mothwing following behind him.

"Brambleclaw, what happened to your ear? Were you attacked by the shadow cat?" Mothwing asked in a panicked voice, trying to keep her voice low.

"No, I found there were badgers in our camp...too many. Where are the-" Brambleclaw slumped to the floor suddenly.

"Leafpool, come quickly! Someone!" Firestar yowled.

Shadowsight, Alderheart, and Firestar moved Brambleclaw gently into the medicine den.

"He's losing too much blood." Leafpool's voice was distant. "Alderheart, we need more cobwebs. Get me more, wrap them tightly, so the bleeding can be stopped. I think he will be fine as soon as the bleeding is controlled."

"I have a lot of cobwebs over here. Here, take some." Willowshine offered. Her blue-green eyes wide.

Jessy stood at the entrance of the medicine den. "Can I come in to stay with him?"

A voice erupted. "What happened to Brambleclaw? Where is he?" Squirrelstar's voice filled the camp. Her gaze darted in all directions till she met the stare of Jessy. The two she-cats stared each other down. Both their eyes narrowed.

Squirrelstar pushed Jessy to the side, and Jessy glared at her as she entered the medicine den without even asking.

"What happened, Alderheart?" She padded up to her son.

"It seems there were some badgers in the old camp. Look at his ear-" Alderheart's voice was full of emotion.

"Well, he still has one ear that is good," said Jayfeather. "And thankfully, this did not kill him."

"We need to know if this is related to the shadow cat." Yellowfang started.

"No," Firestar answered her. "He mentioned badgers in the camp. "I think him and-" He looked up at Jessy awkwardly. "I think he found them at the ThunderClan camp."

"Yes, he mentioned there were too many." Mothwing added with a troubled expression.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about him being attacked by the shadow cat. Why did he go back to ThunderClan camp again? That is very unlike Brambleclaw."

Flametail's comments were followed by silence.

All the cats looked over at Jessy accusingly.

"I didn't do this to him! Don't look at me!" She yelled back at them.

Cold stares answered her.

"But it happened when you were with him." Squirrelstar said frostily, her fur bristling. "You left with him." She stated bluntly.

"I had no idea there would be badgers." Jessy choked up. "And if I did, I-"

"Please!" Brambleclaw stirred in his nest. "Please stop fighting with Jessy." He yelped in pain as Leafpool finished tightening the cobweb around his ear.

"Get me poppy seeds now!"

"I can't find any." Willowshine's voice was small and shaky.

"What happened to them?" Jayfeather roared. "We had enough for all the Clans put together this morning!"

The medicine cats looked at each other helplessly.

"This can't be happening again." Yellowfang was clearly annoyed. "We have a watch on the den. How come no cat saw anything?"

"It doesn't matter now. I can't stand to watch this." Alderheart moved forward, brushing off any speculations and silencing everyone. "I will go look for some."

"Alderheart, it's very late and very cold. Maybe you won't find any

with the frost." Squirrelstar objected tenderly. "Wait until tomorrow when it is warmer."

"I don't care. I have to try now. He can't wait till tomorrow."

The medicine cats watched from the entrance of the den as Alderheart plunged out into the darkness.

Chapter 9

Despite the chill of the near leaf bare, Alderheart rushed through the forest. His pelt fluffed out, a ginger ball of furry fury. His paws squished into the dampened RiverClan marshes as his speed slowed gradually.

Reeds brushed past him gently, as if encouraging him to tread forward in the light wind of the evening. Mud thickened every now and again, pulsing under his claws, but he remained determined to find the precious poppy seeds for his father. The territory was new to him. More slippery, more muddy. Different, unexplored scents flooded his nose, but Alderheart managed to stifle them and latch onto the familiar smell of poppy seeds.

Opening his jaws, he could taste marigold with it too, and he felt a wave of relief. There was still hope to find something, despite the remnants of frost and dreary cold.

Alderheart planned mentally to himself. *The marigold would prevent infection for Brambleclaw's wound, and the poppy seeds would aid his pain and help him sleep.* He was very pleased.

Since the news of the shadow cat had reached him, Alderheart had lived in constant worry, for his sister; another day, his mother; some days, all of them together. Today, it was his father. He felt helpless as a medicine cat, and he kept all his worries buried inside. For who could he tell, his family? Alderheart shook his head at the thought. And Jayfeather wasn't the best listener when it came to feelings and worries.

He breathed a sigh of relief. In that moment, Alderheart felt some of those worries were under control.

There was hope, after all, even when it was least expected. He moved with pride, confidence, and hope as he gathered the poppy seeds. *I finally am not helpless as a medicine cat*. He was energized by his words as he imagined his father improving with the precious supplies.

Alderheart picked his way through bushes. Despite the reeds and shells of RiverClan territory, there were no leaves and infiltrating trees to block his way. He was very grateful that he did not have to search through dense ThunderClan forest when he was so pressed on time.

Tracing the herbs was hard still though, and Alderheart winced as he slipped into a muddy puddle as he neared the riverbank.

RiverClan territory has its drawbacks too, he mused to himself.

Wait!

Alderheart stopped in alarm. He turned to scan the area around him. *I can smell something. Not prey. No, something worse. Death. Decay.*

The dark ginger tom was horrified by the new smell permeating the air, growing stronger with every moment. *Something is wrong*.

Gazing in all directions once more, he didn't see the shadow cat or any enemy around him. He didn't feel any movement. But there was something int he distance. Something that caught his eye, promptly stopping his search for medicine.

Alderheart crept closer as he crouched low cautiously. It was very still and black. Blacker than the night. It was splayed across the roots of a rowan tree.

A crow? He was taken aback. *This is definitely not prey*.

Alderheart carefully moved the crow, only to find part of it completely rotten. The smell stung his nose and nearly blinded him with disgust. He could feel vomit rising inside him, and he had to swallow hard to force it back down.

Its silky, black feathers were torn and scattered across the soft marshy floor, as if the cat who had eaten it was in a hurry. It was very messy.

How did a cat eat this? Alderheart muttered silently, horrified.

The flesh of the crow was filled, nearly stuffed with strange, squirming black maggots. Alderheart had never seen the likes of it before.

Wouldn't this make a cat sick? He didn't know whether to be horrified, disgusted, or stunned.

Stranger still, was the inky blackness of the crow's eyes, blacker than even its midnight feathers. Its empty, blank eyes pulled Alderheart in, making him tremble and feel dizzy.

Then everything disappeared.

There was a river of sloshing darkness, teaming with swirling restless shadows, rising up from the crow's scattered feathers and pouring out from the crow's fathomless, cold eyes. It covered Alderheart, swallowing him in darkness. The strong tide swept him from under his paws, and he couldn't keep his head above surface. He felt himself slowly drifting lower and lower into the black shadow. Unlike water, it stuck to him, choking him, suffocating him like a blanket and freezing him like the coldest waters, all at the same time.

Alderheart felt panic bubbling in his chest. He was lazily drifting deeper as the black shadow stuck to him, pressing him further. He sloshed his paws violently, fiercely.

His head rose. He gasped. The blackness tried to pull him down, trying to push him down once more. Until all the sudden, the water pulled away as swiftly as it had come. It was as if an unseen force had drained it into the marshy floor. No where to be seen.

Alderheart stumbled to his trembling paws. The marsh was gone. Everything was gone. Instead, hard, cracked, black earth crumbled beneath his paws, dry and desolate.

"Hello?" Alderheart cried out in a trembling voice.

It was even worse than the Place Of No Stars.

A claw-scratch of a moon drooped in the sky. It looked as if it was depressed to shine its dull rays across such a bleak land.

Withered, dry oak formed leafless trees, but the choking, dense heat that stuffed the air signaled it was not leaf-bare.

For as far as Alderheart could see, not a single sign of life stood in this hopeless, dreary place. He could see, but all he felt was darkness.

The scene changed again quickly. Alderheart was in utter darkness. Not a single light shone here, not even the feeble moon he'd seen.

The air shook as the acid scent of burning stone flooded Alderheart's nostrils. It was a familiar scent to him, something all cats dreaded with common fear. Something fast, quicker than a blink, rushed past Alderheart in a loud rumble. A pull of foul, hot wind tugged at Alderheart's fur, and he fluffed his pelt out as he stared before him.

A screech followed the rumble, then suddenly bright sunlight streamed into his eyes.

Alderheart winced, and closed them for a few more seconds before glancing around. Silence. Death. Decay. But there were poppy seeds nearby.

He was back in RiverClan territory with the crow at his paws. Its pungent smell was undistinguishable. As he looked down upon it, It had a single white dot in the middle of its eye now, glaring right straight at Alderheart.

Unsettled, confused, and in total fear, Alderheart peered around him. No signs of movement still, not even prey. No doubt the smell of the crow probably scared every living prey in the area. He quickly dashed towards the poppy seeds, gathered a few leaves of marigold, and hurried off, fearing the shadow even more than he did before.

As he pressed onwards, he shook with fear. *Was I being following? Would I make it back to camp safely? That shadow, it was the shadow. I know it was.*

He hurried faster, terrified for his life.

Brambleclaw groaned softly and grunted under his breath, tossing and turning in his nest. The medicine cats watched him, knowing very well they could not do that much more for him. Squirrelstar gazed upon him longingly, searching for something lost in the past.

Several times, Brambleclaw muttered "Jessy", leaving Squirrelstar in the uncomfortable position of having the she-cat facing her. Only Brambleclaw's nest was between them. Their glares were stopping the air in the room.

Squirrelstar missed Brambleclaw. But since Ashfur had taken over his body, she had lost a part of him. She found herself wanting to be with him, be loyal to him, but at the same time, yearning for who he use to be. And he just wasn't that cat anymore. His mind was barely held together by threads.

To be honest, she thoughtfully considered, *I don't even know how to speak to him. He is so furious with me. I wish I could, but will he listen?*

Brambleclaw stirred in his nest, facing Squirrelstar as he opened his eyes. He yowled, as if pierced painfully by something. He was staring straight into her eyes.

"You! How dare you come here after you tried to kill me with the mouse!" He desperately flung himself forward, and the medicine cats had to hold him down, his rage boiling over onto Squirrelstar.

"Get her out! She's poisoned the herbs! She has poison, I tell you! Get her out now!"

The medicine cats all looked at Squirrelstar helplessly. Leafpool gazed upon her sister tenderly. "Perhaps it would be better-"

"It's not fair!" Squirrelstar cried. "He won't listen to me anymore. All

I have done is take care of him, and he won't listen to any one except HER!"

Her eyes burned at Jessy. The two she-cats crashed into each other, shaking the herbs stored and waking several cats in their nests.

Tigerstar, who was still sleeping in the medicine den, flicked his ears, annoyed. "Shut up, both of you have bees in your brains!"

"Enough!" Jayfeather roared. It took all the medicine cats to break the two she-cats apart. "This is not a place of fighting, mouse-brains!"

"You all are flea-brained! Get out now!" Yellowfang erupted.

Jessy and Squirrelstar were pushed out of the medicine den. Yellowfang looked at them. "I don't care what is going on between the two of you. This is not a time for fighting, and this is certainly not the place. If you can't respect the fact that this is a medicine den, then neither of you should enter!" She fluffed her tail up and stomped away.

Squirrelstar whispered, "Sorry Yellowfang. Please let me speak to Brambleclaw one more time-"

But Jessy interrupted her before she could finish. "I will check on Brambleclaw. You have no right to tell me I can't be with him." At first Squirrelstar thought the rogue was talking to her, but then she saw her staring furiously at the back of Yellowfang.

As Jessy forced her way back into the medicine den, Jayfeather met her with a hiss.

"Don't come in here again!"

Jessy tried to push Jayfeather to the side aggressively, but Jayfeather's teeth caught her tail, and he dragged her back as she clawed helplessly at the ground.

Squirrelstar's eyes glittered with humor. Then it left when she heard a cat approaching her from behind.

"Alderheart!" She cried out, rushing to brush her muzzle against her son and lick his ear. "I'm so glad you returned safely."

Alderheart didn't respond to her. He trembled with a nod, looked around the camp wearily, and went into the medicine den silently.

Brambleclaw slept peacefully after he received his medicine. Mothwing washed his blood stained pelt with a moss ball of water and put fresh cob webs on his ear, but the tom didn't stir or feel any pain.

She turned towards Alderheart, concerned. "That's it. What is wrong? Alderheart, you are not even looking at us or speaking to us. Are you feeling well?"

Squirrelstar had rejoined them in the medicine den.

"Yellowfang, I-"

"It is not important now, Squirrelstar. We fear there might be something wrong with Alderheart."

"No, there is nothing wrong with me," Alderheart corrected, standing on his paws suddenly as if his mind cleared. "I had a vision."

"A vision?" Mothwing cocked her head to the side, curiously. "What was it about?"

"I hope it was about the shadow," Yellowfang added. "We need more information about it. We are getting nowhere."

"It was about the shadow. I saw it."

"Are you hurt?" Squirrelstar rushed to his side.

"No, thank StarClan. I was looking for the medicine then I smelled something disturbing, disgusting. I thought at first there was something moving nearby. I was alone. I went closer to the smell, I found it was a crow."

"A crow?" Goosefeather perked up at the sound of prey.

"Yes, a crow. But it wasn't a regular crow. It had strange, black maggots in it, and it was rotten. I did not understand how any cat ate from it without getting sick. There were signs though that some cat had ate it. The flesh had been eaten, feathers scattered all over the floor." Alderheart shivered. Squirrelstar placed her tail lovingly on him.

Goosefeather looked disappointed and slumped back into his nest.

"A shadow swallowed me after that. It was like a river."

"A shadow!" Willowshine gasped.

"I nearly drowned in it," . Alderheart turned his gaze downward, thoughtfully. "Then it changed. I found a blackened, cracked land below me with empty, leafless, dead trees and blistering heat. It looked like leaf bare, but the heat was suffocating."

"And then what happened?" Jayfeather asked in an eager voice.

"Then I heard the roars and rumbles of the Thunderpath. I saw monsters moving fast. I could smell the burned ground. Their lights blinded me as they sped past. "

"The Thunderpath?" Leafpool's eyes widened in disbelief, confusion. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Alderheart shook his head sadly. "I came here as fast as I could. I didn't know where the shadow was, what it had done to me, if it was following me. I just came here as fast as possible."

"There must be a connection- the crow, Thunderpath, the shadow." Jayfeather speculated. "It is a sign for us."

"What would the connection be?" Mothwing asked, her voice thoughtful. "Could it be a sign of who the shadow cat is?"

"We don't know. But we can know that the shadow is moving, perhaps spreading to the Twolegs, our camp, StarClan. Maybe it is spreading everywhere. Perhaps it will not just destroy our world, but the world of others too, like the Twolegs?" Yellowfang whispered.

"We must report this to the warriors." Squirrelstar interjected. "We should search the area for the crow tomorrow and try to see if we can find any scent near it."

"There was none." Alderheart shook his head, "There was nothing."

There was a pause and silence.

"What crow?" Tigerstar broke the silence, his amber eyes gleaming.

((/: A.N: We're back from sickness to write the Looming Darkness! (Not completely recovered but we are getting better)

Chapter 10

Leafpool was awake early. Her mouth was full of cold, damp herbs as she returned to the empty, hushed camp. The air was cold, and Leafpool was eager to get the herbs stored up fast. She had planned and prepared for leafbare as much as possible. Now that the Clans were together and there were no borders, she hoped it would be easier to search freely during the coldest season for the cats.

The dawn patrol had not returned with any prey yet. Leafpool decided to slip into the medicine den before they returned. She did not like to make it obvious that she was worried about the supplies for so many cats, but she was. She just kept it to herself, along with many memories that had rekindled inside of her. So many feelings had been uprooted since she was forced to leave StarClan.

"Leafpool-" She turned to face the cat near the medicine den.

I thought I was alone. That's strange, she thought to herself.

Crowstar looked around awkwardly, checking to see if any cats nearby could see him. Leafpool's eyes filled up with a familiar sadness when she looked upon him. Even after all the time apart, her hollow, empty expression haunted the black warrior and made it hard for him to look into her eyes.

"I was wondering- maybe I could speak with you about some of the elders in my Clan. I thought they might need some herbs."

"Why don't you ask Kestrelflight?" Her tail seemed to droop as she spoke to him.

"Well, I don't want the cats to become more sick, and since Kestrelflight is not awake yet, I thought it best to speak with you. Do you mind if we speak somewhere else though?" He lowered his voice. "I don't want the other cats to worry."

Leafpool blinked her eyes, stunned. "Sure, there is a pebble path by the lake not far from here. I might be able to find some additional herbs from there."

The two cats walked side by side, away from the camp in silence until their figures disappeared.

Hollyleaf grumbled as she patrolled through the forest looking for prey.

"It's not even leafbare, and I can't find hardly anything!"

"Speak for yourself. I have a plump, juicy vole." Turtlecrawl beamed, her head held high, and her tail swishing with pride.

"One vole is not enough for all these cats." Hollyleaf rolled her eyes. *It's too bad she doesn't hunt as well as she boasts.*

"I agree with Hollyleaf." Lionblaze interrupted Hollyleaf's anger thoughts. He grazed his sister's starry side affectionately. "There is not enough prey. I have been doing dawn patrols for several mornings now since my recovery, and it seems every day the prey is becoming less."

"We do with what we can." Firestar commented from behind. His voice sounded very fatigued.

"I think we should spread out more." Lionblaze asserted. "I am not afraid of the shadow cat. We are hunting too close together. Now that the Clans are hunting all together, we should be able to explore all the land for prey. It will give us more options."

"I would ask your leader for permission before you go to another area, Lionblaze." Firestar responded sternly.

"I'll go with you." Hollyleaf stayed by her brother's side. Together, they scented for Squirrelstar, trying to keep themselves quiet. They knew that she would be hunting nearby.

They found her trying to catch a mouse that had temporarily left its

hiding. She jumped onto the leaves that it was hiding under, pouncing it, then swiping it with success. "Finally!" She cried out victoriously.

"Squirrelstar," Hollyleaf approached her. "Great catch!" She dipped her head, as she padded toward the ThunderClan leader.

"Lionblaze and I would like to hunt further out and separate from the rest of the patrols, not too much more, but just a bit. We are not having success at finding any prey."

Lionblaze rolled his eyes at the idea of not being successful. "I know if we spread out, I will catch something." He spoke confidently to Squirrelstar.

"I am sure you would too," Squirrelstar added thoughtfully. "But I can't allow both of you to hunt away from each other. You know now because of the shadow, there must always be cats near to other cats for their own safety."

Lionblaze opened his mouth to protest, but Hollyleaf looked at him with a nod. "Sure, Squirrelstar, we must follow the rules. We will hunt away from the others together. Right, Lionblaze?"

"If the two of you stay together in the same area, then you can hunt somewhere else. But don't go too far." Squirrelstar added.

Lionblaze let out a long sigh and moved away from the rest of the dawn patrol with his sister.

His mood changed quickly though, as he was able to catch several pieces of prey fairly quickly.

"I am going to return these back to camp. You want to join me?" He looked over to Hollyleaf, who was still intently scanning the forest. She didn't make eye contact with her brother, obviously distracted.

"No, I think I will try to catch one more piece of prey. This is a good area. But Lionblaze, you can't go back to camp. You have to follow Squirrelstar's rules and stay nearby." She looked at her brother with glimmering eyes. "Don't worry, I won't be long." She added, trying to cheer him up.

Lionblaze rested on a patch of icy ground with a few, withered leaves on it. "I will wait for you here," he said impatiently. "But try to be fast. The weather is getting colder."

"I am just going right beyond these bushes, so you will be able to hear me and get to me quickly, in case-" Hollyleaf stopped.

She brushed her paw against some frost, trying to wipe it off. "I will be back soon." She finished and left abruptly.

Lionblaze remained behind disgruntled. *This shadow cat is not that brave. He or she won't even attack all the Clans at the same time. It just lurks around hiding, hunting one cat at a time. I don't know why every cat is so afraid in the first place.*

He yawned and closed his eyes, finally going into a light doze. His paws made a shielded circle around his successful catches.

Hollyleaf peered through the lines of bushes near the river bank. She noticed, with great pleasure, that there was an entrance to a nest of water voles.

Flattening against the earth, placing one starry paw before the other, Hollyleaf crept slowly towards the nest. Pausing to scent the air, Hollyleaf smelled familiar cats nearby.

Leafpool was with...Crowstar? Alone?

Trying to ignore the uncomfortable prickling in her pelt, Hollyleaf crouched behind the row of bushes that bordered the pebble-ridden shoreline of the lake. She wanted to look away, knowing that it was not her business, but her curiosity was too intense.

She could see Crowstar and Leafpool walking side by side next to the lake. Their tails were entwined as they chatted together in low, animated voices.

I never thought it was possible for Crowstar to sound like that, she thought to herself, somewhat humored. *He's a completely different cat!*

Hollyleaf pricked her ears, trying to listen to what they were

meowing on about, but their voices were too low to hear, and she could only catch a few words of their conversation.

"Jayfeather...you..." Crowstar mewed.

Leafpool's eyes were shining. "I...all...Hollyleaf..."

Hollyleaf squeezed closer, straining and concentrating. *If I could just push myself a bit closer- but they might see me.*

"-her better in StarClan," Leafpool continued, purring. Her voice was full of warmth, but it remained too far off. Crowstar's body was relaxed. All his usual tension was gone. Hollyleaf almost gawked at his loving demeanor, a completely different side of him she had never seen before.

But she stopped herself and moved upright. *I shouldn't be doing this. I should leave. I am intruding on their privacy.* She decided it was best to leave. As she turned her back on them, something made her pause.

"...Shadow cat." Leafpool meowed.

The words stung Hollyleaf, temporarily distracting her from leaving her parents. When she peered through the leaves again, she noticed Leafpool's tail was dropped. She looked so small and devasted in the stark white ice around her, while Crowstar's pelt was ruffled in alarm. His eyes were troubled, and his body had completely stiffened from Leafpool's words, as if he were preparing for battle.

Suddenly, Crowstar was thrust backwards onto the half ice, half water of the lake. Hollyleaf jumped in the bush, nearly erupting out of it, as she stared in horror. The moment had happened too fast.

Crowstar let out a yowl of alarm as the ice below him slowly seemed to darken until it was midnight black.

He took a step forward, and immediately the fragile ice beneath his paws shattered, and a black mist rose up, fogging up the view of the tom, spreading towards Hollyleaf with sharp tendrils.

Hollyleaf felt blood and horror roaring in her ears. Her body

trembled all over.

Had Leafpool pushed him? It had happened so fast she could not tell.

There was no time for Hollyleaf to think as she pushed her way through the bushes and leapt towards the hole in the ice where Crowstar had fallen in, stopping just at the shoreline. The black mist was gone, sucked into the hole where Crowstar had fallen.

Leafpool was desperately scrambling at the water's surface, crying out in anguish. She didn't notice Lionblaze as he appeared at the scene.

"Hollyleaf," he panted, "I came when-" He froze. "What happened?" He glanced at the two she-cats and the hole in the ice.

Blackness started to spread at the edge of the ice where Crowstar had fallen, and cold water sloshed over onto the frozen lake, bumbling greedily.

Leafpool snapped out of her daze. "Crowstar fell in! I am going after him." The she-cat motioned herself over to the hole, and the ice crack started to grow towards her. Lionblaze stopped her.

"Wait! We can think of another way to do this. Calm down."

Leafpool met Lionblaze's eyes temporarily, then her gaze darted back to where Crowstar disappeared. An obvious hysteria was rising inside of her.

Hollyleaf was frozen as ice, not moving, as Lionblaze returned with a long branch. He carried the branch in his mouth with Leafpool's aid and aimed it towards the hole in the ice. "Pull!" Lionblaze growled in a strained voice,

A soaked, midnight paw latched onto it, and the with a thrust, Crowstar was pulled out of the water. Immediately, Leafpool and Lionblaze nudged the dark warrior, trying to keep him upright. He was shaking with frost quickly forming on his pelt. His eyes were wide as he gasped for breath, speechless.

"He's in shock." Leafpool kneeled to his side and began grooming his

pelt the wrong way to get his blood moving. Crowstar remained speechless, staring ahead, with a blank, horrified stare. Not a single time did he blink. His breath heaved in and out, and Leafpool placed him down looking into his eyes.

"Crowstar? Can you hear me?"

Crowstar breathed in and out ferociously. His chest heaved up and down. Leafpool leaned against him in an attempt to clear his chest, helping him to breathe better. She put her head on his head to keep him warm, but he continued to shiver violently with chills.

"We must move him. The air is too cold. Help me lift him now and get him back to camp!"

Hollyleaf, Leafpool, and Lionblaze gently moved the warrior to the camp. His eyes started to close, but he was still shivering from the cold.

Placing him on a nest with feathers, the three cats looked upon Crowstar. The sheltered warmth of the medicine den calmed him a bit, but he had not spoken to any cat.

"Crowstar-" Leafpool attempted to speak to him. "His breathing is normal now." The she-cat placed her head towards his chest. "And he is warmer now. I think he just needs rest."

Hollyleaf narrowed her eyes at Leafpool. "I will stay with him till he wakes. I am sure you have other cats you need to check."

Leafpool nodded, quickly checking the other cats. She sneaked quick glances over at Crowstar in between.

Hollyleaf continued to watch Leafpool as she went about her duties. She wanted to keep silent, but she burned to ask questions. Leafpool wasn't unaware of her watchful gaze. An expression of uneasiness was in the medicine cat's gaze, and as she looked back at Hollyleaf, Hollyleaf felt her pelt become hot.

"So, you saw what happened to Crowstar? Were you with him the whole time?" Her voice tried to stay calm, but it quivered as she watched her mother carefully.

"Yes." Leafpool turned towards her daughter. Her amber eyes were dark. "I was talking to him about some of the elders- he had some questions about herbs."

Hollyleaf cleared her throat loudly, knowing this was not the truth because she had heard the two of them together.

Would she tell me more lies?

Trying to put a lifetime of lies to rest had been difficult for Hollyleaf. But she had changed. StarClan had brought her peace.

*Until now- s*he thought grimly. *Why was her mother the only cat with Crowstar when he was attacked?*

"Hollyleaf, what's wrong?" Leafpool's eyes welled with concern, and Hollyleaf found herself having a hard time looking at the she-cat, while thinking the same dark thoughts.

"Nothing is wrong. I need to get out of the den now." Hollyleaf suddenly whished out, leaving Leafpool stunned by her leaving. She knew there was something very wrong, but Hollyleaf would not say.

After all this time, she still doesn't feel comfortable speaking to me.

"Leafpool-" Crowstar's voice cracked, stopping her thoughts abruptly.

She moved quickly to Crowstar's nest. "How do you feel?" she asked warmly

"Did you see it?"

Leafpool changed. Her eyes couldn't meet Crowstar's.

"Yes, I did. The shadow, it attacked you. It-" Her voice trembled, and the two cats looked deeply into each other's eyes.

"What happened to you?" Her eyes were wide with worry as she asked.

"I lost a life." He replied blackly, darkly. "I couldn't find it. It was right there, and it attacked me before I could even see it. If only I had seen it! Then I would know who is behind all this, and I could have stopped them once and for all!" Crowstar was starting to lose his temper as he finished his sentence.

Leafpool licked his pelt down, assuredly. "Crowstar, I was there. It was too fast. There was nothing either of us could have done. Please, don't make yourself upset. You need rest. I will give you some poppy seeds, so you can sleep."

"No, I must go at once-" Crowstar stopped suddenly. Leafpool's broken eyes latched onto his, and he couldn't finish. He paused.

"You are right. I will get some rest; it can wait. But I must speak to the Clans about this before the day ends."

Leafpool nodded as she placed the poppy seed in Crowstar's mouth. Her figure silently moved around the other cats in the medicine den.

The other medicine cats returned from eating prey outside. As they walked past Hollyleaf and headed towards the medicine den, Hollyleaf watched all of them disappear into the den.

"Hollyleaf, come eat. You haven't touched any food since we returned." Lionblaze moved to his sister's side.

Hollyleaf's gaze broke, as she looked at her brother. Her head shook, panic rising in her eyes. "Lionblaze, something has happened. I am afraid-"

Just then, Squirrelstar stood in the middle of the camp. A look of determination was in her eyes as she looked upon the cats in the clearing.

"All cats, come together, we have news to share about the shadow cat!"

Hollyleaf peered over to her leader, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with dread.

Is the shadow cat my mother?

Chapter 11

Cats spilled into the camp fairly quickly. Even the kits peered out of the nursery in curiosity. The medicine cats, except for Leafpool, also joined. Eventually the whole of the camp was so crowded with furry pelts that the ground was no longer visible.

Squirrelstar stood in the center with an enraged Tigerstar standing close by. Firestar managed to come right behind her, followed by Leopardstar glaring at him with narrowed eyes. The leaders tried to move in towards Squirrelstar as the massive union of all the cats began.

"I have important information about the shadow cat."

Immediately, the camp fell silent. The kits withdrew back into the nursery. Nothing but the wind could be heard. It lashed in response to Squirrelstar's voice.

"Alderheart has had a vision. I believe it to be important, but I don't know how. That is why I am sharing it with all of you."

"Don't know how-" Thornclaw snorted nearby. Dustpelt rolled his eyes along side him.

Squirrelstar didn't glance their way and remained focused.

"Alderheart found an evidence of the shadow cat in the forest. It was a crow."

"A crow!" Tigerstar roared with an outrageous tone. He began pacing back and forth at the head of the meeting.

"Yes, a crow." Squirrelstar responded annoyed. "This crow was no

ordinary crow. It was full of maggots, and it had the black shadow coming from it."

"Isn't it strange that the sign would be a crow? Where is Crowstar now?" Tigerstar moved in front of Squirrelstar to grasp the attention of all the cats.

"Tigerstar, this is not the time."

"He is missing, isn't he? And why would he be missing when all the other cats are here?!" Tigerstar moved in front of all the cats.

Immediately, WindClan warriors rose to their paws. "Are you hinting that this piece of prey makes our leader guilty?!"

An uproar began as the WindClan cats began to bristle up, and the ShadowClan cats did also in response

"No," Tigerstar's eyes gleamed. "I am hinting nothing. I am just stating the obvious. The shadow is coming from a crow, and Crowstar is missing."

"Tigerstar!" Squirrelstar looked at him with her eyes blazing. "We are not here to start accusations."

Tawnypelt briskly came to her son's side. Her eyes burned at him, and he avoided her gaze, lifting his head proudly.

Hollyleaf moved forward, her green eyes darting at every cat around her. Her anxiety was building up inside of her.

"It is not Crowstar. Crowstar lost a life this morning to the shadow."

Yowls and meows filled the air in outrage. Squirrelstar stopped speaking, stunned. The noise of the cats was so loud, nothing could be heard.

"Wait everyone-" Firestar began. He nodded to Squirrelstar. "I think we should listen to Squirrelstar first, then we can hear about Crowstar. We must know all the information. Every cat must remain calm, so we can listen."

Leopardstar rolled her eyes.

Squirrelstar looked at her father hesitantly and continued. The gazes of so many cats fell upon her, and she felt overwhelmed by the situation. She knew she had to remain strong. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"Alderheart also saw the black lands of StarClan and the Thunderpath. We believe there is a connection. We are asking any cat if they see the Thunderpath to be careful of the shadow. Maybe it is there hiding among the monsters. We are also going to have patrols go out and search for this crow. I am hoping we might find the scent of the cat nearby."

Jayfeather cleared his voice. "Alderheart already said there was no scent." He stated flatly.

Alderheart looked up at his mother with a guilty expression on his face.

"We have to try. I propose each leader forms a patrol from each Clan now. The sooner the better. But first-" She turned towards Hollyleaf.

"What is this about Crowstar losing a life? Where is he now?"

"He is in the medicine den."

Squirrelstar scanned the cats near the medicine den. "Who spoke to him? Who knows information about what happened to him?"

Lionblaze came forth. "He was with Leafpool."

"Leafpool!" Breezepelt screeched, his tone filled with disgust. Lionblaze hissed at him. "Yes, Leafpool. She is a medicine cat in case you didn't realize that."

"My mother died of green cough several days ago, and Crowstar didn't even remain by her side for vigil. Now he is with Leafpool instead!"

"Breezepelt," Lionblaze began flatly, "this is not the time right now."

"Of course you would say that." He sniffed haughtily.

"He is your Clan leader! Show respect!" One of the WindClan warriors yelled from the crowd of cats.

"Leafpool saw what happened to him." Lionblaze finished.

"Did any other cat see what happened?" Squirrelstar interrogated.

Hollyleaf began to itch, as if there were fiery ants all over black pelt, turning it red. She closed her eyes. Her mouth could not open. It felt dry, parched.

"Where is Leafpool?" Squirrelstar looked at the medicine cats.

"She is in the den with Crowstar." Willowshine answered her.

"Bring her here."

Willowshine went into the medicine den and stayed behind, while Leafpool entered the camp swarming with cats of every size and color.

"Leafpool, you saw what happened to Crowstar? What did you see?"

All the cats turned towards Leafpool.

Will she tell the truth?, Hollyleaf thought. *Has she changed?*

"I was speaking to Crowstar about the elders in his Clan-"

Why won't she tell the cats what she was actually talking to Crowstar about!, Hollyleaf roared inwardly, her paws shaking. *What is she hiding?*

Breezepelt growled, interrupting her and grabbing the attention of many cats with sharp, angry glares.

"He was asking me about herbs for them. He was not sure if they still have some in their dens."

"If that was the case, then why weren't you checking the dens of the elders?" Breezepelt turned and faced Leafpool defiantly.

But this time, no cat disputed him.

"He- he was afraid that the other cats would feel his worry. He didn't want to worry his Clan!" Leafpool spoke louder.

"And you just happened to be with him when the shadow attacked him?" Breezepelt crept closer to Leafpool. His fur bristled.

All the cats slowly turned to Leafpool, horrified.

"Give her a chance to speak!" Squirrelstar yelled, interrupting the silence.

"We were walking together on the lake."

"Why did you go to the lake in the first place?" Breezepelt demanded.

"To talk about the herbs for the elders, as I already stated," Leafpool answered.

Breezepelt narrowed his eyes furiously, his fur bristling so that he appeared twice his size. "Leafpool is obviously the shadow cat! She murdered Crowstar! She led him away from the camp, so she could do it without any cat witnessing!"

"I would never harm Crowstar!" Leafpool, who was usually calm and quiet, was now hissing.

Squirrelstar nodded. "We all know Leafpool. She-"

"Of course you would say that!" Tigerstar growled. "You're her kin! Firestar's kin have always been together, huddled close in secrets."

Firestar fluffed out his pelt and stepped forward, his head high. "I think we should-"

"And you are all biased as well! Any cat who accuses one of you is silenced by your biased for each other. I will not allow it anymore!" Tigerstar interrupted, and earned a very offended look from Firestar.

"I agree with Tigerstar," Leopardstar meowed. The cats got quiet.

"What difference does any of this make? We have no certainty of who the shadow cat is, and even if we did, what would we do then? Is it possible for us to even defeat the cat?" Reedstar tried to interfere, but he was unheard over the loud hisses and yowls.

"It's Crowstar!" Tigerstar repeated stubbornly. His tail swished madly.

"Crowstar would not kill himself!" Yellowfang snorted.

"Crowstar is not the shadow cat!" Leafpool insisted.

"The only other suspect is you, then." Tigerstar narrowed his eyes at Leafpool. "Are you admitting that you are the shadow cat?"

"Of course I am not the shadow cat." Leafpool's fur puffed out in defiance. "Just because I witnessed something, does not make me guilty. No cat will allow me to explain what happen!"

"No, Leafpool is not the shadow cat." Brambleclaw growled. "There is another suspect."

Hollyleaf could have sworn she heard Squirrelstar mutter, "Not this again." She definitely flicked her ears in an irritated manner.

"Squirrelstar has already tried to murder me, and she has proved that she is willing to break the code for her own selfish reasons!" Brambleclaw accused, and Jessy stood up beside him.

"Squirrelstar has been stealing herbs too. This endangered all the cats sick with green cough," Jessy added. "I saw her with my own eyes."

"Enough of this! Squirrelstar would never hurt Brambleclaw, even if he got another mate!" Ivypool yowled. "This idea that Squirrelstar would hurt all the Clans just because her mate is interested in another cat is absolutely ridiculous, and it needs to stop."

There was a brief, awkward silence. Every cat was embarrassed by Ivypool's outburst, although it only stated the obvious about

Brambleclaw's new mate. Every cat was embarrassed except for Jessy, who of course, was utterly delighted and entwining her tail with Brambleclaw's.

"This is not about mates," Tigerstar snorted, "The shadow cat is either Squirrelstar, Leafpool, or Crowstar. That is the evidence we have before us now."

"Unless all three of them have been framed," Ivypool objected. "What makes you think that the shadow cat would want to make it obvious who he or she is? Perhaps he or she wants us to all turn against one another."

"It is suspicious that three cats have such strong evidence against them as the shadow cat," Jayfeather meowed thoughtfully. "Too suspicious."

Thornclaw rolled his eyes. "WindClan cats have always got bees in their brains! All the problems that ever occurred within the Clans was because of them. It's obviously Crowstar," He scoffed. "I don't know why we need to continue discussing this subject."

Breezepelt unsheathed his claws and looked ready to hurl himself at Thornclaw.

"Enough!" Leafstar commanded. "This is getting us nowhere."

"Perhaps we should take a vote." Hawkwing suggested near her.

"A vote?" Squirrelstar questioned. She gazed upon Hawkwing with interest.

"Each cat should vote for whoever they think is the shadow cat," Hawkwing explained.

"That's ridiculous," Tigerstar snorted.

"No, it's not," Squrirelstar interjected. "It sounds reasonable to me."

Rootspring frowned. "But wouldn't every Clan vote against the other Clans?"

"I'll vote for Leafpool," Breezepelt offered, glaring at the tabby she-cat.

"I'll vote for Crowstar," Thornclaw mewed snarkily in response.

"Crowstar is not the shadow cat!" Leafpool's pelt spiked.

"She's defending Crowstar, but not herself," Tigerstar meowed thoughtfully. "Perhaps Squirrelstar and Leafpool are in on it together."

"I would never harm Crowstar! Besides, there are no witnesses to prove that I ever harmed him." Leafpool looked defiantly up at Tigerstar.

"And there are no witnesses that I tried to hurt Brambleclaw!" Squirrelstar roared.

Hollyleaf felt her fur prickle uncomfortably as she lowered her gaze and stared down at her paws. The burden of what she was carrying was too much to bear, and Hollyleaf's chest felt tight as if she was struggling to breathe.

Hollyleaf took a deep breath, coughing as she inhaled the cold air too quickly. *I have to make it through this meeting, then I will tell Jayfeather and Lionblaze all that I saw. They will know what to do and whether I should confront Leafpool alone or in front of all the Clans.* Hollyleaf felt a pain in her chest at the thought of yet another unwanted secret she was carrying, and once again, because of Leafpool. How strange was it, that even in death, she had to live with a painful secret?

Reedstar interrupted her thoughts. "But voting wouldn't be fair," He shook his head, "We might vote out the wrong cat. How is it fair if we wrongly vote a cat, or we accuse the wrong cat?"

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Leafstar retorted her tail-tip twitching impatiently.

Reedstar fell silent.

The silence was broken by Yellowfang.

"If we can't decide, then we should let the suspects decide amongst themselves."

"That's a terrible idea," Tigerstar objected immediately.

"It could work," Hawkwing meowed thoughtfully.

Squirrelstar nodded. "They could figure out who it is."

Tigerstar glared meaningfully at Squirrelstar. "I'm sure we all know who it is."

Squirrelstar's fur bristled along her spine, and Hollyleaf could see she was making an effort to keep herself calm.

"I'm sure we'll find out," Hawkwing replied to Tigerstar coldly. His fluffy tail curled neatly around his paws.

Tigerstar nodded brusquely at Hawkwing, his eyes narrowed.

Leafpool headed into the medicine den to bring Crowstar. She did it begrudgingly, as Tigerstar insisted on one of his warriors accompanying her.

Leafpool padded back out with a tired looking Crowstar. He immediately straightened himself up as all the cats came into his view, but his fatigue did not leave his eyes.

Squirrelstar padded over and sat down beside Leafpool, while Crowstar sat down on Leafpool's other side, forming a triangle between the three cats.

Tigerstar flicked his tail impatiently.

All the cats turned to face the trio.

"We will hear each cat one by one, then there will be a decision." Reedstar spoke loudly and clearly.

"Agreed," Hawkwing padded towards the three cats.

Even the kits came out of their dens. The pile of prey that was in

the middle of the camp remained untouched and unnoticed. All was silent.

Squirrelstar began, looking at all the cats around her. "I have to make a confession-" she began.

Chapter 12

Brambleclaw looked at Squirrelstar with a look of satisfaction.

With every cat looking at her, Squirrelstar hesitated suddenly. She didn't want to condemn any of the two cats near her. At the same time though, she felt she had to put her duties first as a leader.

It might be difficult, but I will do what is right, she thought stubbornly.

"Well?" Tigerstar glared at Squirrelstar with an anticipating glint in his eyes.

"I have seen Crowstar the past few nights leaving the camp alone."

"What?" Breezepelt nearly leapt forward on Squirrelstar.

"Please let me finish. First, I noticed he left about the same time Alderheart went to the forest. I did not think it was important, and I still think Crowstar had a reason for doing so. He continued to leave every night late when most, if not all the cats, were in their dens. I have to tell this to all of you because of the situation now, not because I think Crowstar is the shadow cat." She eyed Leafpool in a guilty manner. Leafpool looked down, unable to meet her sister's eyes.

Crowstar closed his eyes wearily, miserably. For once, the dark warrior was silent. Tigerstar, seeing him weary and quiet, did not waste any time to catch the opportunity.

"I knew that crow was a symbol of you!" His voice was seething, filled with hatred.

WindClan and ShadowClan cats started yowling at each other and unsheathing their claws. It took the RiverClan and SkyClan cats much effort to calm them and separate them.

"Wait, Tigerstar!" Firestar yelled over the cats, his voice commanding and booming. "We are doing this to judge all three of these suspects, so all three of them should be allowed to speak. Crowstar, what do you have to say about this?"

Firestar looked upon Crowstar with a gentle expression. "Despite our differences, I also believe he has a good reason for leaving the camp late."

Crowstar awkwardly looked around. His voice was rushed as he spoke. "Sometimes I go out late to walk the forest. I am sorry. I know I am not supposed to because of the circumstances-"

"Liar!" Tigerstar roared. "You are not telling the truth. He is hesitating, and his eyes are wandering when he speaks! We must find out what he is hiding!"

All the cats started whispering to one another. It was unclear what any cat, except Tigerstar, was thinking. Leafpool looked anxiously at Crowstar.

A soft voice came from beside the medicine den. It was Willowshine.

"May I speak?"

"Yes, you may," replied Firestar, silencing the crowd of cats once more.

"I have seen Leafpool leaving the camp late at night also. I am sorry, Leafpool."

She stared into Leafpool's eyes, guilt all over her face.

"It is alright." Leafpool broke the silence. "I have been leaving the camp late at night also." She looked at Crowstar. "I have been speaking to Crowstar outside of the camp. He has been needing my help-"

"Don't start with that again!" Breezepelt interrupted her. He started padding towards her quickly. "We all know what happened to him the last time you gave him help!"

Kestrelflight intervened. "Breezepelt, Leafpool is a faithful medicine cat to her Clan, despite her other faults. You should at least let her speak. StarClan has forgiven her, so you should also."

"Leafpool, everyone, it is alright." Crowstar sighed. "The truth is, I have been meeting Leafpool late at night out of the camp. I just wanted to speak to her because she is always busy taking care of cats. I have no intention of breaking the code, nor does she. We are just talking."

All the cats went silent.

"Well, this is not a very big surprise." Jayfeather snorted.

"But if the two of you are meeting at night several times, that means that you are witnesses to each other's whereabouts." Firestar seemed rather pleased with the idea as he spoke the words.

"Leafpool-" Yellowfang began with a reproachful voice.

"I know." Leafpool sighed. "You don't have to tell me."

"So now there is only one cat we can't account for." Brambleclaw's eyes danced as he spoke the words slowly. His voice was very animated.

Jessy beamed, and her tail swished happily in response.

Squirrelstar narrowed her eyes. "I am *not* the shadow cat!"

"You sound guilty and defensive. And you are very upset these days. " Thornclaw mused, eyeing Jessy and Brambleclaw.

Squirrelstar glared at him.

"Neither Crowstar nor Leafpool are guilty because they were together." Tigerstar shrugged, "And Squirrelstar did lie for moons about Leafpool's kits. She has lied countless times to sneak off when she was Brambleclaw's deputy. Honesty is not in her character obviously."

Squirrelstar jumped to her paws. "I was forgiven for that! StarClan

themselves forgave me!"

Nightcloud's starry spirit glared at her. "Not all of StarClan can forgive you."

"Yes! Squirrelstar is guilty because another cat witnessed her taking herbs, and she gave me a mouse with deathberries!" Brambleclaw crowed from his corner with Jessy.

Hawkwing moved closer to the middle of the cats. He looked towards all of them and calmly. "We can't accuse Squirrelstar without evidence."

"We have plenty of evidence!" Brambleclaw snarled. "She stole the herbs and tried to kill m-"

Something stopped Brambleclaw's rambling. A dark haze was covering the camp, fogging up the sun and the clouds in the sky. All the cats looked above them, some of them started to cower; some of them bristled their fur. The haze was growing, and the sky disappeared. There were confused gasps and murmurs among the camp when suddenly, shadows started to build within the haze.

"Something is wrong." Leafpool whispered to Crowstar.

"I feel it too." Jayfeather murmured. His paws trembled beneath him.

In the blink of an eye, there was a rumble. Yowls erupted in the camp. A dark, long shadow fluttered from the top of the haze. It began darting and spinning all over the camp, moving so fast, that it could hardly be seen.

"It's the shadow cat! Seize it!" Tigerstar cried out, stunned. Every cat tried to follow the shadow, swiping, clawing, jumping, and running, but to no avail. The shadow, on the other hand, found its victims quite easily. It twisted like a tornado towards the nursery, where the kits were screeching, and Daisy stood in front of the nursery. The shadow knocked her over, and she fell with a crash. A chilling, wailing mew was heard from her.

Then her lifeless, creamy pelt lumped on the camp floor. Every cat

stared horrified. It had happened so fast.

The haze that had covered the sky now enclosed all the camp, trapping the cats together in a dome shape. It continued to trickle down from the top of its foreboding covering, growing faster now, making it difficult for the cats to see one another.

"Daisy!" Cloudtail yowled out her name, trying to find her amongst the haze, but by the time he reached her, her spirit was standing over her body.

The shadow cat's silhouette turned and erupted from Daisy's lifeless body, and leapt to the top of the haze looming over the camp. It twisted, crashing among warrior after warrior, cat after cat.

"Some cat must catch it!" Crowstar's voice was furious, but trembling.

Horrified meows filled the air.

It was like a black bolt of lightning crashing down. Tigerstar lunged at it, leaping high above the ground to try to claw it, but he slid right off of it, and his body fell limp to the ground.

The shadow cat let out a hideous purr, similar to the rumble of thunder. The den of the nursery started to crumble, and the entrance of the medicine den faltered from its strength. Cinnamontail rushed out to try to keep the debris from closing the nursery.

Dovewing's yowl of anguish filled the camp as she rested near the lifeless form of Tigerstar. Her grey pelt covered his body. She didn't look up or move.

Every cat was frozen now, staring at the shadow cat, not sure what they could do.

"Every cat!" Firestar yowled. "Stay away from it! Don't touch it!" Fear was in his voice.

The shadow cat darted forward, rolling now, like a black ball of fury towards Leafstar. It let out a single, black paw, as Leafstar tried

to duck out of the way unsuccessfully. She fell instantly, swallowed up in its wrath.

Crowstar raced towards the nursery where a rock was going to fall on Cinnamontail at the entrance of the nursery. He pushed Cinnamontail out of the way, and the rock nearly landed on him just as he was trying to escape. His tail managed to evade the rock as he nudged Cinnamontail into the nursery with the other Queens. He turned to leave, just as the shadow cat flickered to him, turning and twisting, and rumbling. Crowstar bristled his fur in response, and attempted to pounce on the shadow as it neared him, but the shadow seemed to swallow him, spilling its darkness all over his body. There was only blackness. Then it vanished, leaving Crowstar a black, lifeless mound at the entrance of the nursery.

Several WindClan warriors charged angrily towards it as Its silhouette appeared again. The dark shadow of a cat, moving too fast for any cat to catch. It body swerved and tumbled towards Heathertail, as she stood watching in horror in the middle of the camp. Heathertail disappeared and let out a screech, leaving all the cats motionless, helpless.

Ivypool screamed, "We don't know what to do! We can't catch it!" Just as she spoke the shadow lunged towards her like a gust of hot, dead air. She dodged out of its way, leaving Hawkwing helpless in front of the shadow. It continued moving towards him in its fury.

"No!" Squirrelstar yowled, and lunged into the way, blocking the blow of the shadow cat from Hawkwing. The shadow collided with Squirrelstar, and it rolled along the ground over and under.

"Squirrelstar!" Hawkwing darted over to the blackness, as it began to lift like a fog, looking for its next victim. Hawkwing found Squirrelstar curled up, round, and still. He tried to nudge her motionless body.

"Is it gone now?" Jayfeather's head turned, his sightless eyes wide and alert.

"Can any cat see where it is?" Ivypool asked, short of breath. Every cat was silent, waiting.

Just then, the shadow cat burst from the ground, its massive body and paws spiraled downwards towards a ground of cats in the camp. It smashed into Pouncestep, Dovewing, Reedstar, Mistystar, and Barkface before any sound could be heard from any of the cats.

The loud rumble was pleased and roared defiantly, hurting the ears of all the cats. The blackness spilled over the still bodies like long claws, lingering, swiping, then the silhouette formed again- a giant black cat. It whirled like a tide, moving even faster. Cats darted and ran away from it now, instead of trying to fight it.

Unfortunately for Tawnypelt, she did not move fast enough. She stood stunned as the shadow came straight towards her. Her green eyes wide with panic.

All the cats froze as they crouched away, waiting for yet another blow from the shadow. Some of them closed their eyes, so they wouldn't have to watch. Tigerstar yowled "No!" His voice could be heard echoing in the air.

Just as the shadow collided with Tawnypelt, another dark shadow erupted from Tawnypelt's chest. It grew bigger, its claws thrashed at the original shadow cat, leaping towards it- two huge, black cat silhouettes in the sky.

But the original shadow cat froze in response. It didn't move, seemingly terrified and frozen by the unsuspected match. An equal match. It crept away, backing away from Tawnypelt's shadow looming over her. Then the first shadow cat split apart, letting out a yowl, as it fluttered away from the camp. The haze dome that trapped the cats in the camp collapsed, breaking away diverging, and all signs of the shadow cat disappeared.

Tawnypelt's paws were rooted to the ground as every cat stared at her in a mixture of horror and amazement. They stared silently, not sure of what to say. Their faces were hard to measure. Tawnypelt could feel her pelt on fire and her legs trembling.

I scent fear, she thought to herself. She panicked, running away from the camp as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Wait!" Firestar cried. "Every cat, we must get her before she is lost."

All the warriors rose to their paws to retrieve Tawnypelt. The camp looked desolate, grey, and weak after they left. The medicine den entrance was damaged, and the nursery entrance was wobbly. Medicine cats began moving the killed cats' bodies and the injured ones. The spirits of the deceased cats joined the StarClan cats in aiding the injured. Their silent work was saddening. The only sound heard was in the nursery where several queens were trying to calm their kits with soothing whispers.

Tawnypelt raced as fast at her paws could take her. She didn't allow any pebbles or reeds to stop her, jumping and leaping over obstacles like a rabbit. She could hear voices in the distance, but she didn't want to know what they were saying.

I just want to be alone. I need some time to figure out what just happened. How do I know I will be safe if I stop? How do I know that the Clans will not suspect me? And how, how is it possible I have a shadow?

Her paws trembled as she stopped in front of a bed of mud, still untouched by the frost. It was freezing as she rolled herself in the mud, but she hoped it would hide her scent, just enough for her to escape.

She slithered on her stomach, laying low until she found an abandoned cave that no doubt, smelled like fox. She climbed into the den scenting her way around carefully. The smell was stale, but she hoped it would be enough with the mud, so she could temporarily evade the other cats.

Her mind was sorrowful, confused, and lonely. Who can I trust? *Even Brambleclaw will look at me differently now.* She thought to herself horrified.

Hiding deep in the fox den, she closed her eyes tightly, hoping that no cat would scent her. She noticed a light rain outside.

Good, that will help too. She still felt uneasy, and she shivered from shock.

Am I safe with my shadow?

Tawnypelt rested on the cold floor of the abandoned den. She tried to remember if she had seen this shadow before, but she couldn't. She didn't even know how it came out of her.

How can I go back to the Clans when I myself don't understand what is wrong with me? Is something wrong with me? She trembled at the thought as sleep swept her away.

Chapter 13

Tawnypelt padded along the shady pine trees of ShadowClan. The sun peaked through the slits in the pine needles, and the sky was a brilliant blue. The weather was warmer now, much to Tawnypelt's delight, and she could smell the scent of all kinds of prey filling the air, making her belly turn with hunger.

She lunged, trying to grasp the prey, but every time she did, she just missed. First, she almost pounced on a mouse, then she lost a vole. Tawnypelt began to have a strange, off feeling in the pit of her stomach.

I usually don't have any problems catching prey, she grumbled inwardly. She decided to leave the area and hunt somewhere else.

Determined, Tawnypelt pushed through the thick pine trees. The first scent of green leaf was in the air; all the frost was gone. It tickled her nose and gave her fresh energy.

As she passed tree upon tree, she finally reached an opening. In front of her, there was a wide stretch of river with calm, sparkling pools along the edges of the water drift. Thirsty from the unusual heat, Tawnypelt dipped her head forward to drink.

Her reflection stared back at her in the water, while her tongue gently lapped the water. As her pelt grew blacker, she was oblivious to the change.

Something hot panted behind her. It panted louder and louder as if it was calling her. Sensing someone near her, Tawnypelt lifted her head, meeting her reflection in the water.

It had now turned into a black shadow staring at her with empty eyes. She turned her head quickly to see what was behind her, sensing the hot breath was no longer there.

There was a shadow cat padding away from her. She moved forward towards it, not because she wanted to, but because she had to. She felt suddenly drawn to it.

The shadow cat hissed, turning its face upon her.

"*Tigerstar*!" Tawnypelt cried out.

In the midst of the black shadow cat, there were two amber eyes staring at Tawnypelt- two eyes she could easily recognize and know as her father's. Suddenly, the shadows around Tigerstar's face melted away, and Tawnypelt found herself face to face with her father. His amber eyes were bursting with impatience as he moved towards her, rushed, calculating.

Tawnypelt stumbled back a few paw steps in shock. The blades of grass beneath her paws began to tremble, and the trees began to swirl and disappear.

The strange shadow cat that was now Tigerstar widened its eyes. "Wait!"

Tawnypelt hesitated, moving forward, wanting suddenly to speak to her father.

But he was gone. She found herself in the abandoned fox den once more. The sun was setting, and dusk was rapidly creeping across the forest.

This was something important, Tawnypelt thought to herself. She felt tired as if she had hunted, but she stubbornly pushed aside her ache. She rose to her paws anyways, pacing the den, deep in thought.

I saw the shadow come from inside me. Is the shadow Tigerstar? Does that mean that Tigerstar is inside me? Or are both inside of me? I know one thing for sure from this dream. Tigerstar is related to the shadow cat. Even if the shadow cat is inside of me, this means that Tigerstar knows more than I do. He could be the shadow cat, or maybe he was trying to tell me something. If I tell the Clans this dream, they will realize that I am not responsible for the shadow, Tigerstar is. Now I can

go back to the Clans, and tell them this important information. Maybe some of them won't believe me, and I will have to fight, but I am prepared to do that if it means I can help the Clans in finding answers. Helping the Clans must come first before my fears.

Small springs of joy suddenly bounced in Tawnypelt's paws at her own realization. *I have evidence I am not the shadow cat!*

Tawnypelt pushed her way out of the narrow opening from the deserted fox den.

Small flakes of snow were drifting lightly down from the sky, wetting her pelt and making it darker than ever. The snow was light enough that Tawnypelt could make her way back to the camp.

The flakes twirled around, dancing through the trees and creating a thin layer of cold snow across the ground. Frost clung to branches and froze, creating drops of ice that hung from the twigs. Tawnypelt ducked to avoid the sharp, dangling icicles in a rush to find the makeshift camp in RiverClan territory for the Clans.

"She's back!" Rootspring yelled from the fresh-kill pile. All the cats that were otherwise in their dens came out to see the she-cat. There were some glances of warmth, some of terror, and others of indecision. Tawnypelt decided that she wasn't sure who to trust just by their gazes.

I will put my trust in the Clans alone, and let it guide me.

She closed her eyes briefly, as she reminded herself.

Squirrelstar and Leafstar came from the medicine den where they had been resting. All the cats waited for Tawnypelt to speak. Their expressions were confusing and overwhelming to Tawnypelt. She took a breath, preparing herself to speak.

Just as she did, Tigerstar's gaze met hers. It stopped her, paralyzing her. Her heart wrenched when she saw her son. He was hovered beside Dovewing and Pouncestep's bodies, protectively guarding them with his claws. Behind him, their spirits were watching him solemnly.

Tigerstar's eyes did not move from his mother's form. They were dead, flat, and she sensed a hint of accusation in them. She felt a flicker of surprise at the realization that occurred to her.

*Is he angry with me? Does he think **I'm** the shadow cat? It can't be true. No*, Tawnpelt told herself in disbelief. *I can't believe that.*

Brambleclaw was the first to meet Tawnypelt. He left Jessy's side and padded towards her, a warm glow in his eyes with a mix of relief. He pressed his muzzle against Tawnypelt's, reassuring her and comforting her so much she was temporarily distracted from her son.

"I was worried you ran away because you thought we would accuse you of being the shadow cat." Brambleclaw meowed and paused to lower his voice. "Even though it's quiet obvious who the shadow cat is." He glared fiercely at where Squirrelstar was sitting and talking to Hawkwing intensely. The two cats were not paying much attention to Tawnypelt or Brambleclaw's interaction, or any other cats for that matter.

"Brambleclaw, we all saw what the shadow cat did to Squirrelstar." Tawnypelt stared at her brother in amazement. *He really has lost it*, she thought sadly to herself.

"In any case," Brambleclaw ignored her comment, "we are relieved you are back. And those cats who are not have bees in their brains." He glared at several cats around the camp, but Tawnypelt couldn't make out who he was exactly talking about.

The cats scattered around, staring at Tawnypelt in anticipation. Or was it fear? Hundreds of furry heads peered at Tawnypelt with a mixture of suspicion and confusion.

"What's *she* doing here?" Breezepelt demanded, stalking through the crowd. His amber eyes blazing with fury.

Heathertail's spirit watched him beside Crowstar warily, silently. Whitetail was sitting beside Heathertail's body, making vigil for her. Her eyes were completely broken and devasted as she stared at her lifeless body.

Crowstar had joined Heathertail's mother in remembrance. The dark warrior's eyes were soft with sadness and memories.

Whitetail's eyes looked up, meeting Tawnypelt's gaze. All the softness in her eyes disappeared, and a blatant hostility was clear as her fur began to spike. Her voice broke the frosty air with a hiss.

"She's the shadow cat!" She said the words with deep disgust and loathing.

Tawnypelt shook her head, but her heart was saddened at the sight of the cats making vigil for their loved ones. Her voice was steady as she spoke though.

"No, I am not the shadow cat. I have come back to the Clans to help. I bring information that can help us to understand our enemy better."

"You!" Breezepelt lashed out. "You have the shadow inside you! You can't help us! All you can do is hurt us!" Whitetail nodded her head, her eyes piercing in agreement.

"Maybe I do have a shadow inside me!" Tawnypelt's voice rose louder. "But I don't know how, and I didn't know about it until I saw it, the same time you all saw it. It was unknown to me."

"So you innocently have the shadow sitting, waiting inside of you, and you want us to believe that you staying here is safe for us? You will help us?" Tigerstar's words stung Tawnypelt. She couldn't find words to respond, stung by the icy tone of her kit.

Jayfeather spoke in the chaos of the moment. "We should listen to her, let her speak. Then if we feel she is not safe, we can kick her out of the Clans. But at least allow her to speak first. We need information about the enemy. "

No cat responded to him. He continued.

"Remember that when the shadow cat attacked, Tawnypelt's shadow scared it off. It made it leave. So both shadows are not the same. One is afraid of the other."

"Perhaps you are right, Jayfeather." Squirrelstar jumped to her paws. She approached Tawnypelt. "When I was attacked, Tawnypelt was nowhere near me."

"And when Tawnypelt was attacked, I saw fear in her eyes." Leafpool commented. "She was just as afraid and helpless as all of us." Leafpool looked around at all the cats as she spoke.

Breezepelt rolled his eyes and went back to staring at the lifeless face of Heathertail, his eyes filled with love and despair.

"I know there is a lot of pain now. But we can't allow that to cloud our judgement. We have to look at this situation for what it is. There is no harm in allowing Tawnypelt to speak, then we may choose what to do with her," Jayfeather continued.

"I agree," Firestar moved to sit in front of Tawnypelt. "Speak to us and tells us what happened from your perspective."

Tigerstar looked away from his mother, turning his face to Dovewing and Pouncestep's limp bodies.

"I feel pain too," Tawnypelt began. ″I feel pain for all cats who have lost a life or a loved one. I know their spirits are here with you, but it is hard to find comfort in that when they can't be with you forever. I believe I now have some idea of who could be behind this. It is not me.″ She said sternly.

Tawnypelt paused, hoping Tigerstar would look at her, but he did not.

"I found a fox den while I was in the forest. It was abandoned. I went there, not because I killed any cat, but because I needed to think clearly. I was just as confused as all of you when the shadow appeared from me. I could not control its movements. I did not summon it forth. It was like it was its own being. I never expected for it to appear, and I needed some time alone."

There were whispers about the cats, bitter musings. Tawnypelt pushed them away, ignoring them as she continued.

"When I was in the fox den, I had a dream. I met a shadow cat, and

at first it was just a shadow cat."

"Then what?" Breezepelt interrupted rudely. He scoffed with disgust.

"Then it became Tigerstar- the first Tigerstar, my father."

"Tigerstar!" Several cats yowled in unison. Many cats rose to their paws in uproar. A great feeling of calamity and stress fell upon the cats as they exchanged nervous glances.

"Tigerstar is dead. I killed him in the dark forest." Firestar's gaze blazed as he mentioned the cat's name.

"That is true, but I saw him, and he wanted to tell me something. I believe he wanted to tell me something about the shadow cat." Tawnypelt looked deeply into Firestar's eyes as she spoke.

"So your evil father spoke to you in a dream, and how is this suppose to help us?" Breezepelt narrowed his eyes at Tawnypelt.

"I don't know." Tawnypelt admitted helplessly. "I feel there is some meaning behind it though."

"It could be some information to identify the shadow cat. If you would use your brain instead of thinking with your anger, you would realize that!" Jayfeather was boiling at Breezepelt. "This is not about *you* and *your* loss right now. We don't have visions from StarClan now. This is the only time we have ever received information about our enemy. This information is more important than *your* loss now." Jayfeather spoke the words coldly, bluntly.

Breezepelt growled in response, but rested his eyes on Heathertail. Somehow as he stared at her, his amber gaze softened, and his demeanor changed. Heathertail's spirit left Crowstar's side and went to Breezepelt. Her spirit's eyes were searching and pleading.

He looked at the lifeless Heathertail, and the gleaming, shimmering Heathertail beside her, and somehow the two of them connected, retreating into their own world. Breezepelt was silenced as he stared at both of them.

Crowstar rose to his paws. "I will speak for my Clan."

All the cats turned to him.

"We are at great loss now. Jayfeather is right. With loss, we have to accept responsibility."

His gaze fell on Leafpool as he spoke. "Sometimes we have to find a purpose, an answer, even though we are not ready. I think this is the time when all of us, no matter are Clan, should work together to find answers. We can only defeat an enemy if we know who they are."

"Indeed," Firestar's voice boomed, "If Tawnypelt has the shadow in her, we can use this to our advantage. At the same time, we should keep an eye on her to better understand. The sooner we can figure out what this shadow is, we can defeat it."

But not all cats agreed. Some of them whispered in dismay to each other. Some of them didn't want to look at Tawnypelt, others looked at her from the sides of their eyes wearily like she was a monster.

"So how did Tawnypelt get the shadow then?" Tigerstar interrupted the silence.

"Is it a sickness?" Cinnamontail curled her tail protectively around her kits. "Or some kind of disease? What if it can spread to all of us and possess us"

"Power and strength like that isn't a *sickness*," Tigerstar snorted.

"But what does Tigerstar have to do with all this?" Firestar added loudly, "I killed his spirit long ago in the Great Battle."

Jayfeather glared pointedly at Firestar. "We all know that." He mewed. "But perhaps seeing Tigerstar in the dream was a symbol. Dreams do not usually have straightforward meanings."

"I didn't see anything in the dream. At first, I saw the shadow cat, but then the shadows around its face faded to reveal Tigerstar." Tawnypelt explained.

"Does that mean Tigerstar has come back from the dead?" Sparkpelt's voice quivered, and her body trembled slightly at the thought.

"I killed his *spirit*!" Firestar repeated frustrated, beginning to lose his temper.

"We *know*, already." Flamepaw said as he nearly rolled his eyes.

Sparkpelt whirled around to glare at him and whispered something scoldingly to him. He padded away to sit next to Bayshine and Sorreltail.

"Or maybe it means another cat with the same name is behind all of this." Thornclaw hissed, turning an accusing gaze to Tigerstar.

Tigerstar's hackles lifted. "You saw me lose a life, and I would never harm my kin."

"He's right." Dustpelt mused. "It can't be him. It doesn't make sense. He would never kill Dovewing."

"The shadow cat must be a cat who was not with us in the camp when we were attacked. Any cat who was there fighting in the camp, any cat who was killed by it, can't be the shadow cat." Reedstar reasoned.

"It could be Tigerstar, himself." Mothwing meowed, her gaze thoughtful. "That is what was in Tawnypelt's dream. Time and again, he has proven that he can destroy the clans and plot against them even when we think he is gone."

Reedstar nodded.

"His spirit died! I killed it!" Firestar insisted.

"We always think Tigerstar is dead. And yet, he always manages to make problems where we can't see him." Yellowfang spoke softly.

"Is it possible that his spirit is back somehow?"

"I need to speak to him again before we can decide anything."

Tawnypelt spoke hesitantly. "He was definitely alive with something when I saw him in my dream, but I don't know what."

She shook her head frustrated.

Firestar's eyes blazed ahead into the forest, searching.

Perhaps it is possible, the thought echoed in his mind. *Who else would do this to the Clans?*

Chapter 14

The dim sun was setting on the cats in the camp as they distributed prey. Snow had finished falling, and the kits were tumbling about in the center of the camp. Their fluffy, furry tails were weaving in and out of the warriors.

Leafpool was in front of the medicine den speaking with Jayfeather quietly. She looked up, temporarily distracted, as Crowstar brought the medicine cats a large piece of prey.

"Thank you." She murmured softly to the WindClan leader. He didn't respond, and padded away briskly.

Many of the warriors were whispering; their gazes frequently fell upon Tawnypelt.

Tawnypelt was awkward. She was trying her best to distribute prey among the elders and sort through them. Eventually she carried a large vole over to the elders' den.

Entering quietly, so she wouldn't disturb any sleeping cats, she placed the vole and started to leave, thinking of what might be left on the prey pile when she reached it. There wasn't too much in the first place.

I hope there will be something left for me, she worried to herself silently. *There's too many cats and not enough prey.*

"What are you doing in here?" Thornclaw's voice croaked from the darkness.

Cloudtail rolled over in his nest looking over at Thornclaw. "Do you

think it's safe to eat something she has touched?"

"I am not sure." Thornclaw narrowed his eyes at Tawnypelt. "ShadowClan and shadow cat- it makes perfect sense to me." He hissed.

"Both of you are mouse brains." Brightheart stood from her nest. "I will gladly eat what Tawnypelt has brought us. Thank you Tawnypelt for bringing us prey before you yourself ate." Her eyes were filled with warmth as she spoke.

"You are welcome." Tawnypelt beamed.

At least there is some hope that not every cat suspects me.

She still left the elders den with her tail hanging low. She could feel the eyes of cats on her and hear their whispers, but when she looked up, their heads would turn. *I have never felt so out of place in the Clans in all my life*, she thought, depressed.

Even when I was a kit, the cats in ThunderClan weren't this suspicious of me!

I need to speak to Tigerstar again. I must find out more information. Only then will the cats start to behave normally around me again. I have to understand what has happened to me. If only I could have another dream!

Ridgekit bumped into Tawnypelt's leg as he ran past her in full speed. He turned to see which cat he bumped into, only to find Tawnypelt looking down upon him. His little whiskers quivered and his eyes widened as he stared up at Tawnypelt.

"It's okay." She purred, trying to ease the tension. Ridgekit squeaked and ran away from her. She could hear the kits screaming "shadow cat" as they played in the distance.

This is ridiculous. Tawnypelt felt so frustrated. Not a single cat would look at her or speak to her, unless their gaze was more of a suspicious inspection.

She took a small mouse and went to eat next to Brambleclaw, lonely

as ever. She looked over at Tigerstar who was staring off in the distance at a snow pile, while remaining next to Dovewing's spirit and lifeless body. His expression was lost.

Firestar moved to the center of the camp. "All cats, I think we should head inside. The sun is now almost set, and the weather is too cold to stay outside. We don't need more green cough," he added.

"Do you always have to speak for everyone?" Leopardstar was clearly annoyed. "You shouldn't tell all of us when we should go to our dens. You aren't the leader of all these cats."

"I am not moving from here." Tigerstar turned his head and glared at Firestar.

"I am just thinking in the best interest of the Clans." Firestar retorted.

Tigerstar was the only cat who stayed outside. Rain fell on him as he dozed next to Dovewing's lifeless body.

"Tigerstar-" Her spirit whispered to him softly. "You will get sick. You must stay well for our kits. Please, come with me to the den for shelter." She looked at him pleadingly and nudged him towards the den. His eyes kept looking back at her lifeless body, but he eventually retreated from the cold.

The camp fell silent once they had left. All cats had retired to their dens escaping from the brittle leaf-bare. Only the sounds in their dens could be heard, whispers in the night.

Squirrelstar and Hawkwing sat in the warriors den together engaged in deep conversation. The rain outside had stopped, and the warrior den was too stuffy and crowded for their liking.

"How about we get some fresh air?" A lot of cats looked at Hawkwing as he spoke, making him uncomfortable. Their nosy curiosity was unnerving. Some of them hushed them because they were trying to sleep.

"Yes, I think it's better if we talked outside." Squirrelstar stood up, and both of them left the warriors' den.

The air was clear, seemingly unintimidating. They padded together away from the camp till they found a fallen log out of sight. A clump of fern was hanging over it for shade and protection. The moon was a claw-scratch hung in the sky, its weak beams of moonlight sliced through the cold, crisp night.

They continued their conversation more freely now that they had more privacy. They would peer occasionally at the camp, hoping no cats would come out and notice them. Their voices were abruptly silenced when they noticed movement in the clearing.

"Wait!" Squirrelstar shot up, alarmed. "Do you see that?" She whispered very quietly.

As they spoke to each other, a cat silently crept further across the camp, unaware that it was being watched by them.

"What do you think it's doing?" Hawkwing murmured.

Squirrelstar frowned. "Who is it? Can you tell? Its pelt looks black from over here. It's just not clear enough. I think we should confront it. It might be a danger to the cats."

Hawkwing shook his head. "Wait!" His breath came out in a frosty fog. "The cat is moving to the center of the camp away from the dens. We should see what it will do."

The two cats slowly moved off their log to get a closer look.

They could see the silhouette of a cat sneaking across the camp, moving towards a large jagged boulder in the center. It let out a muffled hiss of pain as it pulled something from its paw, but it was unclear to Squirrelstar and Hawkwing what it was.

"It's wiping something on the boulder!" Squirrelstar was alarmed.

"No, it's placing it on the boulder." Hawkwing corrected her gently.

Suddenly, two amber eyes peered in their direction, shining in the

moonlight. Hawkwing and Squirrelstar held their breath, but couldn't help continuing to watch in curiosity. The cat turned away quickly as if it sensed someone was watching.

Squirrelstar frowned, looking up at Hawkwing. His gaze was even more perplexed.

"Where did it go?"

"There!" Hawkwing nudged with his head. "Its backing away from the camp. It's moving so quietly. Do you think it's possible it's related to-"

"Of course I do," Squirrelstar finished confidently. She blinked.

"It's vanished!"

"Did you see anything besides the cat's eyes?" Hawkwing continued to whisper, a touch of hope in his voice.

Squirrelstar shook her furry head, her fluffy tail twitched thoughtfully. "We must tell the other Clans. I don't think it's a coincidence."

"But it didn't do anything bad." Hawkwing added. "And if we tell them, they will find out that we left the den, and we were meeting here in secret." He looked down at his paws.

Squirrelstar rolled her eyes. "Dawn will be here soon, and the patrols will wake. We should head back to the den before other cats notice. Tomorrow we can decide if we will tell the cats or not."

Their eyes met one last time as they agreed silently.

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A cry erupted before the patrol had left. Yowls continued to sound off in the dark.

"Tigerstar!" The voice shook. "He was here!"

The cats rushed out of their dens in the darkness, alarmed.

"What is wrong?" Firestar boomed into the camp with an edge to his voice.

"What Tigerstar?!" He pushed his way in between the cats to reach the center of the camp, where all the cats were surrounding something.

They were all surrounding the boulder. Squirrelstar and Hawkwing stared at each other helplessly, thinking the same thought silently. Their pelts were misty under the last light of the moon.

On the boulder, there was a cat's claw. And sure enough, the shadows in the clearing created a tiger striped pattern on the boulder.

"It's a sign!" Jayfeather gasped. He turned to face Firestar.

Firestar's face was full of rage. His pelt looked as if it was on fire, and he was burning. He started to breathe very hard, staring down at the single claw resting on the boulder. Then he turned, giving all the cats his back.

Sandstorm padded towards him. She brushed her tail against him, trying to comfort him, but he remained furious in his silence.

"A sign-" Leafpool gasped.

"We all know this sign too well." Crowstar said in a grim voice.

"Now at least we know who is behind all of this. Tawnypelt was right."

Mothwing looked up warmly at Tawnypelt, and Tawnypelt nodded, as if trying to thank her, but she couldn't find words.

Is my father responsible for all this? She thought to herself. It was still hard for her to believe.

"Where is he now?" Firestar's voice was seething with rage as he turned to face all the cats. His eyes were cloudy with a crazed haze.

No cat answered him.

"We have to know- where is he?" Firestar raised his voice loudly. Even the kits peeped from their nests to look from the nursery, their eyes squinting with sleep.

"Did any cat see anything last night?" Yellowfang looked upon each cat, meeting their gazes. "If so, please speak now."

Squirrelstar stepped forward, puffing her pelt out. "I will speak. I went for a walk last night after all the cats went to their dens."

"Of course, you did-" Brambleclaw snorted arrogantly.

"Yes, I did." She replied flatly. "I didn't walk far from here. Just beyond those trees is a log. I went there to be- alone." She ended hesitantly. Hawkwing didn't meet her gaze. He looked guilty as ever at the ground.

She doesn't need to protect me, he muttered to himself. *We did nothing wrong.*

"As I was sitting on the log, I saw someone enter the camp," Squirrelstar continued.

"Traitor!" Brambleclaw lunged from his spot and moved towards her. "How dare you know of this and not tell the Clans!"

"Let her finish." Leafpool intervened with a glare at Brambleclaw.

"I didn't tell any cat because I found the cat was walking away from the dens. It wasn't trying to harm any cat. And I wanted to see what it would do. I felt it would be important."

"She was right." Leafpool said thoughtfully.

Crowstar went to stand next to Leafpool. "What does this mean for the Clans?" He looked at all the cats. "Did you see the cat?" His looked at Squirrelstar hopefully.

"No." Her voice dropped. "I wish I had. There was not a lot of light. Its pelt looked black in the darkness. It could have been any color."

"But surely, you must have seen something." Firestar pressed.

"I did see its eyes." Squirrelstar looked up. "They were amber. Very bright amber."

"You saw amber eyes!" Brambleclaw was exasperated, looking at Squirrelstar incredulously. "There are so many cats with amber eyes! You saw nothing!"

"Nothing of much use." Jayfeather added thoughtfully. "Unless you also consider the claw, the dark fur..."

"Tigerstar." Tawnypelt whispered under her breath.

Every cat near her looked at her from head to tail.

"Is it Tigerstar?" Crowstar looked to all the cats. "How many cats have dark pelts and amber eyes?"

"And how do we know for sure that this cat is the shadow cat?" Jayfeather added.

"What do you mean, not the shadow cat!" Tigerstar roared, coming to face Firestar. "Who else would put the symbol of Tigerstar in the middle of the camp? Some cat, tell me who else it could be?"

All the cats were silent. They looked down shamefully.

"See, I am right!" Tigerstar declared arrogantly.

"Possibly." Brambleclaw narrowed his eyes accusingly at Squirrelstar. "Unless some cat is trying to cover their tracks."

Squirrelstar lashed her tail. "I am not the shadow cat! I was killed by it for StarClan's sake!"

"Every cat knows that Crowstar, Leafpool, and Squirrelstar are not the shadow cat. We saw Crowstar and Squirrelstar die before us, and Leafpool was under attack too, even though she was not injured." Yellowfang meowed.

Several cats nodded in agreement.

Brambleclaw shook his head wildly. "No! You are all wrong, and

when Squirrelstar murders us all in our nests, you will see that I was right all along!" Brambleclaw stormed off into the elders' den with Jessy hurrying after him.

Several cats cleared their throats, awkwardly glancing around.

"Anyways-" Reedstar began after a moment or two, "With this new information, our goal now should be to find Tigerstar. Somehow, he is back. We should send out a search party to look for him."

"I'll lead it." Firestar announced immediately, hardly allowing Reedstar to finish.

Breezepelt snorted.

"There should be at least one cat from each Clan," Leafstar nodded. "And at least one or two leaders or deputies. But we must keep in mind that there should be warriors and leaders to protect the cats in the camp."

"I'll go." Squirrelstar volunteered. She rose to her paws and joined her father's side.

"Me too." Hawkwing added, padding towards the two cats. The three of them stood anxiously in anticipation.

"Blazefire will go for ShadowClan." Tigerstar decided, his eyes hollow and weary. He nodded to the ginger and white tom to step forward.

"Sneezecloud and Icewing, you will be go for RiverClan." Reedstar meowed.

"I'll go for WindClan." Crowstar gazed around the clearing, but no cat challenged him.

Breezepelt glared at his father speechlessly. After losing Nightcloud and Heathertail, he was full of venom. Crowstar had hardly spoken to him since they had died, and while he stood vigil for Heathertail, his gaze was constantly on Leafpool or the medicine den.

He deserves to have something bad happen to him, Breezepelt sneered silently.

Firestar nodded at the warriors who had gathered to leave. He stepped forward to stand in front of the group to act as their leader.

"The first place we will look is where Alderheart found the crow."

Chapter 15

Firestar plunged through heavy, sinewy bushes, ignoring the icy cold snow that slid onto his pelt.

Hawkwing and Squirrelstar were just behind him, while Blazefire talked animatedly to Sneezecloud. Crowstar and Icewing were bringing up the rear.

Frosty wind speckled with snowflakes whisking across through the RiverClan marshes.

At least there isn't any mud to squelch beneath my paws because of all this ice, Crowstar reflected. *And the winds are not as harsh as they are in the open moors*.

"This way!" Firestar interrupted his thoughts abruptly.

Crowstar tried not to roll his eyes.

Does he ever think any other cat can lead? We know which direction to walk in, thanks very much!

Firestar reminded him eventually of Leafpool though.

It's hard to imagine that the arrogant, bossy ThunderClan leader is her father. Crowstar sighed out loud.

I miss her already, and I need to move on for my Clan. I need to focus on my duties. But now that she is back again, all my judgement is clouded. Her presence is always distracting me from what I need to do.

Why is it that what I need to do can't ever agree with what I want to do?

The black tom's head hung low, as he reflected on so many years of hurt, regret, and anger. Breezepelt and Nightcloud's anger, their faces flashed in his head, and his hurt and regret that produced so much anger. He always threw it on the cats around him, his son, his mate. He wished he could wash it all away.

*I can't. H*e frowned.

Crowstar leapt over a tall clump of snow-kissed reeds. He looked up to see Firestar gazing back at them, flicking his tail for his patrol to follow before continuing forward. His green eyes were set forward and gleaming with determination. They looked as hard and fierce as the ice itself.

"Can't we go around the reeds?" Blazefire stopped, slightly annoyed. His voice was barely heard above the howling wind.

Firestar met his gaze sternly. He shook his head commandingly from the other side. "The ice next to it isn't solid enough! It might crack!"

Either Blazefire didn't hear the ginger tom, or he thought he could make it because he went ahead and strode confidently onto the ice, padding towards Firestar.

"See? It was all saf-" Blazefire let out a yowl as the ice beneath his paws cracked and gave way beneath his weight, sliding to the side and slipping him straight into the water.

Firestar rushed over to the cracked edges of the pond and looked down where Blazefire had sunk into its freezing depths .

Crowstar dashed next to Firestar. His voice was short. "That mouse-brain! Why couldn't he simply do as he was told?" He lashed his tail. "We don't have time for this."

Blazefire's head came above the water, spluttering. "H-h-help me! It's c-c-cold! I can't d-die yet! I-I h-haven't c-chosen a m-mate yet!"

Crowstar rolled his eyes.

Icewing dragged a loose branch towards the edge of the pond. "Can you reach this?"

Blazefire reached out a flailing paw towards the branch, and dug his claws into the edge of the branch.

Squirrelstar, Hawkwing, and Icewing pulled the other end of the branch until Blazefire managed to drag himself out of the pond.

"That was mouse-brained of you!" Squirrelstar snapped. Her tail was ferociously bushy, and she swung it in anger.

Blazefire lifted himself from the snow, trembling. His white and ginger fur was drenched and covered in small pieces of ice. "I-I-It's c-c-cold," he stammered.

Hawkwing looked around the area. His amber eyes narrowed against the snow whirling wildly against him.

"We'll have to take shelter at least for a while, so that Blazefire can warm up, or else he might get sick. The wind is too strong for us to continue."

Firestar frowned in response. "But we haven't found Tigerstar yet." He dug his claws into the ground, leaving large slashes in the snow. His eyes were set in the distance.

"We must continue. We can't waste time. The crow was found not far from here."

Icewing helped Blazefire stand up.

"Hawkwing's right. In this weather, there's a high chance of Blazefire getting sick, and that'll just slow us down even more. I know it is close, but it is not worth the risk. We don't have any medicine cats with us."

"There's a cave over there." Crowstar suggested, pointing his tail to it. "I saw it when we padded past it. It's just beyond those reeds."

The cats returned back to the cave. Its entrance loomed around three tree-lengths tall. Heavy banks of snow clung to the hanging stalactites in clumps. From the bottom of the cave, stalagmites reached upwards, some connecting with stalactites, while others pointed upwards like snapping teeth. The snow glittered like diamonds from outside, but the entrance was dark and unwelcoming.

"It looks ominous." Firestar frowned. "I don't think Tigerstar would be there."

"We just need it for warmth." Icewing nudged Blazefire along, and the group padded into the cave, swerving around stalagmites until they found a moderately comfortable spot. The crystals of snow blinked up at the ceiling. The ground was smooth enough, and some of it had dirt.

"We should probably rest here while we can." Squirrelstar suggested. "This may not be the most comfortable, but it's sturdy and doesn't have the scent of any predators. It's also well protected from the wind for Blazefire."

"Well, we also need to hunt. That's not good there's no scent of prey. It's been so long since we last ate." Sneezecloud sounded disappointed as he sniffed the air.

"We'll hunt later." Crowstar shrugged. "We have to make do with the situation we have now."

"But there's no moss or bracken around here for my nest." Blazefire sighed.

Icewing gave him a stern look. Crowstar turned his head, his eyes wide with outrage.

"What did I just say?"

Blazefire met the WindClan leader's eyes briefly, quickly looking away and curled up on the dirt, still shaking from the cold.

Hawkwing and Squirrelstar slept near the entrance, while Icewing, Sneezecloud, and Blazefire curled up closer to the back of the cave

to get warmer. Firestar slept just at the entrance, muttering and unsheathing his claws in his sleep as if fighting some invisible enemy. He was very restless.

Occasionally, Squirrelstar would look over at him, concerned. He was lashing his paw out in his sleep. Sometimes his ear would twitch.

At some point, he muttered "Tigerstar." No cat heard him.

By that time, the cold had lulled all of them into a deep sleep.

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Squirrelstar was woken up by a rumbling sound, and the feeling of small pebbles and dust falling onto her pelt.

Confused, Squirrelstar sat up, her eyes wide as she felt the cave shaking around her. She could see the icicles and stalactites dangling and swaying on the ceiling.

"What's going on?!" Crowstar rose from his resting place, his fur bristled.

Firestar was already pacing the cave, moving through every corner. His ears were flat against his head as he roared, "Tigerstar is here! I knew he would be here!"

Crowstar and the other cats looked at the aggressive Firestar, pacing half-mad in the shaky cave.

A throaty laugh echoed through the cave, as if it could see Firestar's desperate attempts at trying to attack.

"You will never truly destroy me, Firestar. It is impossible. My power can't be destroyed." It growled.

Firestar unsheathed his claws, his fur mounding like a giant hill. His voice was exploding.

"Show yourself! If indeed your powers can't be destroyed, then you should face me and fight like a warrior."

Blazefire's eyes were wide as he stood beside Icewing and Sneezecloud, both looking equally shocked. The cave was booming, echoing, and shaking.

"I am the shadow cat!" The voice announced in a much louder voice. "You will never find me, and I will destroy the Clans until there is not a single cat of you left."

Squirrelstar watched with horror as one of the stalactites crashed to the ground, and with it, a den's worth of snow plummeted into a pile.

Thankfully, it hadn't hit any cat, but the entrance to the cave was now collapsing. Stalactites were falling even faster now with snow rumbling forth in its response.

"We need to leave now!" Crowstar yowled. The other cats nodded in agreement, swiftly moving towards the cave's small leftover of an opening.

Climbing over mounds of snow, Squirrelstar paused at the top to look back at her father. He was still pacing the cave, hissing, and trying to jump up higher. He was oblivious to the dire situation. The sound of the evil booming cat's cackling was shaking the walls of the cave now.

"Firestar, come on!" Squirrelstar yelled desperately at him, hoping he would notice her.

But the ginger warrior was still looking for Tigerstar, his fur bushed out as he searched wildly, frantically.

There was only the empty voice now, its cackles echoing against the walls and breaking them.

"Firestar!" Squirrelstar repeated.

Every cat was already out of the cave except for her, Firestar, and Crowstar. Neither Crowstar nor Squirrelstar could leave the ginger tom, and both of them looked to each other desperate now, as Firestar was unresponsive in mad fury. Squirrelstar went back to her father, pulling him by the scruff, as Crowstar watched on. His

eyes were frozen on both of them.

"There is no time! The cave will collapse!"

Coming out of what seemed like a wild haze, Firestar slowly looked up at Squirrelstar, as if just realizing the situation.

His gaze was frantic as he scrambled up the snow and rocks with his daughter. Squirrelstar and Firestar burst out of the cave with Crowstar shortly following them.

"Wait!" Crowstar screeched, his voice laced with fear. It was too late for him.

"Crowstar!" Squirrelstar turned around, her eyes wide, just in time to see a heavy load of snow drop onto Crowstar before he could escape the frozen doom.

***

Crowstar writhed under a heavy, suffocating layer of freezing pure cold. It choked him, and no matter how much he moved, he couldn't feel anything but more snow and rocks. It was heavy on him as if it would break all his bones. As his movements became more feeble, his strength drained. His paws slowed.

Unable to keep going, Crowstar fell limp.

"Quickly!" Squirrelstar, Firestar, Icewing, Hawkwing, and Blazefire tried to dig out the warrior before the snow would suffocate him. But it was too late. His lifeless, black body was covered in shards of snow.

***

Crowstar opened his eyes. He slowly got to his paws. Exhaustion was weighing him down like a stone blanket.

He remembered where he was; it was the moorland where he'd been on his first day as an apprentice.

I remember how proud I was of my clan, how I knew we'd always be

strong. It was one of his best memories in a lifetime of many painful ones.

The earth felt warm and peaty beneath his paws. The swaying grass of moorland was placid and relaxing, gently tickling his belly fur like a lullaby, dancing to the moaning of the wind. The smell of prey made his mouth water as he spotted many rabbits hopping about in the distant grasses.

Suddenly, it all melted away. Crowstar looked in all directions. He found the earth had turned dry and lifeless, black as crust, cracking and breaking. Everything was bleak and empty. There were no stars. Only an ominous, full moon glowed down on the old StarClan territory.

Trembling, Crowstar attempted to move forward. He could hear the ground quake below his feet with every step, the cracks growing in it expanding. He winced at a sudden, sharp pain beneath his paw. He lifted it to examine it, only to find a sharp, jagged, glowing pebble beneath his paws.

Before he could move, the ground dropped away from beneath him, and he began to fall into pitch darkness without any end.

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"He's awake!" Crowstar heard Icewing gasp with relief, followed by snow crunching from the warriors gathered around his body.

He lifted his head slowly. His eyes were bleary, and his mind was foggy. Temporarily, he couldn't figure out where he was or what had happened to him.

The moment he remembered the cave, he jumped up with a start.

"Where did the shadow cat go?"

They were all away from the cave now. Squirrelstar met his gaze. The she-cat's front paws were dusty with crumbs of snow. She hesitated as she looked over at her father, clearly uncomfortable with the question. She spoke quietly and fast.

"We didn't see. We don't know what happened to it. But it nearly killed all of us. I'm sure it planned for this, and it had to a way to exit when it needed to leave."

"We have to find Tigerstar!" Firestar insisted from where he was pacing, his claws, unsheathing them repeatedly. Squirrelstar stared at her father anxiously.

Crowstar gave Firestar a flat look. "I'm not going anywhere when I've been buried in snow. Give me a chance to recover before you start your hunt for revenge again." He snorted at the end with annoyance.

"Did you lose a life?" Hawkwing asked, and Crowstar nodded solemnly. He didn't have any words. The shadow cat was taking too much from him- his lives, Nightcloud, Heathertail. And up till now, he felt like he wasn't any closer to catching it or stopping it.

"Just like the last few times I lost my life, I found the same pebble beneath my paw. The same pebble Tigerstar had when he-"

"Why are we talking about pebbles when Tigerstar is nearby, and we finally have a chance to hunt him down?" Firestar interrupted. He looked Crowstar over. "Now that you have your life back, we need to move before he hurts any other cat. The more we wait, the more risk we take."

"Firestar, it might be important that every Clan leader has found the same pebble beneath their paws every time they lose a life." Icewing meowed thoughtfully. "In order to end the shadow cat, we should understand what is going on first. That may help us find it too."

Firestar shook his head. "What's important is that I find Tigerstar and defeat him once and for all!" He leapt up to a snowy rock as he spoke, looking down upon the other cats with him, ready to be leader once more.

Squirrelstar frowned, deep in thought. "I think we should rest and gather our strength before facing the shadow cat again, Firestar. Crowstar just lost a life, and Blazefire is still weak from when he fell

in the ice."

Firestar looked at the cats below him, frustrated. But no cat would move with him.

Defeated, he sighed. "Alright."

Hawkwing held out a paw for Crowstar to help him up, but Crowstar just stared back at him.

"I am fine now." He puffed his pelt out proudly even though he felt otherwise, but there was no way he would ever show it.

They made camp a good distance away from the cave, and Blazefire, Icewing, and Sneezecloud left to gather whatever they could find during leaf-bare for nests and dens. Squirrelstar and Hawkwing checked the area to make sure Tigerstar wasn't around. They all agreed that they were not ready to be attacked again. This was a time for them to hunt and gain their strength.

Firestar insisted on guarding the camp. But Crowstar wasn't about to wait around. He decided to try hunting nearby their camp, knowing he couldn't go too far. There hadn't been any prey around the cave, and with such a cold leaf-bare, he couldn't be sure he'd be able to find anything, but the proud tom was insistent.

The patrol needed to eat after the long day. Squirrelstar didn't bother trying to hold him back when he announced his intention to hunt. She knew how stubborn he was, and that it would be pointless. She was right. Crowstar was determined to bring something back for the patrol, no matter what.

He did manage to catch a vole, and albeit it was skinny, he rejoiced in the catch. *Any difference will make a difference*, he thought. *I am not about to show the cats with me that I am weak after I lost a life.* These words pushed him further to find even more prey.

He was tracking a thrush when it suddenly lifted its head, as if terrified by something nearby. He tried to pounce on it, but it had already fluttered away in alarm.

That's strange, Crowstar mumbled to himself. *I was sure it didn't hear*

me approaching, and the wind wasn't blowing in my direction.

Something scared it. Crowstar stopped and checked his surroundings.

He tasted the air, but held back his breath immediately, as the terrible stench in the air was too powerful for any cat to breathe.

It made him feel sick, nauseated, and dizzy, but it also made him move forward. He had to find out what it was.

What could smell so foul? He peered around him, but there was no life moving about.

Crouching low, he crept through the icy reeds. He was annoyed by how his black pelt stuck out against the snow, hoping it wouldn't bring any unwanted attention.

Further away, Crowstar could hear arguing up ahead, and the smell was increasing in intensity. He knew he was approaching the foul smell.

Were there loners here? He thought to himself. *I am not going back to the other cats. I must find out who they are before they disappear.*

One of the voices sounded strange, guttural, like a snake hissing and a bear growling at the same time. Its words came out slowly like a hiss, but its voice was furious with a growl. There was another voice too.

A female? Crowstar heard her voice and crept closer with intrigue. As he approached, he hid behind a thick tree. It seemed that the monstrous voice and the female did not hear him, but he could hear them clearly now.

The female voice was sharp and thoroughly irritated with impatience. "You caught me ***rotten*** fish?! What do I look like to you, a rogue?"

From the wood of the tree, Crowstar's blue eyes could see a disgusting fish splayed across the ground at a cat's paws. Its flesh was torn apart and infested with black maggots. Crowstar had to hold his breath, trying not to inhale, instead trying to breathe from

his mouth as quietly as possible. He looked up from the rotten fish, and to his horror, his pelt froze with fear as he looked upon the shadow cat.

It was humongous, perhaps slightly larger than the leader of the sisters. The fish was lying at its heavy paws, although Crowstar couldn't quite see the cat with it. Its shadow was looming over the other cat and swallowing everything around it.

"*You asked for prey*." The shadow cat rasped. "*I bring you prey*." It was faceless, haunting. Crowstar wondered if it was even alive. It seemed like a spirit of all the evils of the dark forest.

"I wanted something edible!" The female cat snapped back. "I don't have the time to catch prey, and you know that."

The voice was familiar, but Crowstar couldn't put his paw on who it was. His mind was racing, trying to remember all the cats he had met before and their voices. At the same time, he felt distracted by the threat of his enemies so close. He knew that if the shadow just saw him, he would lose another life to it yet again.

"*I could eat it*." The shadow cat offered mildly with a hint of content in its voice.

The female cat changed the subject. Her voice became more serious, less irritated. "You've been straying from the plan. You know what we discussed before. You can't just act however you want. We must think first."

"*I'm hungry. I need blood and death to feed me, and you know that. I can't think clearly if I do not feed*." It growled back.

"You're ***my*** shadow cat!" The she-cat's voice was flustered. " You have to do what I tell you!"

Crowstar could have sworn he heard a snort- a very arrogant one.

The she-cat continued in her scolding. "You went too wild last time. Now the Clans are more alert and suspicious." She added, sighing, then added bitterly, "You're making things harder! You will have your prey, but you must wait when I tell you it is the right time."

"*You would not be able to do any of this without my powers, and you know that.*"

The air was misty, foggy with swirls of blackness, and it became hard for Crowstar to see through the twirling mist of darkness as it crept closer to him.

"I smell something." The shadow cat growled and hissed, infuriated. Its blackness rushed towards Crowstar's direction even faster. Its long tentacles of smoke were pointing towards him, almost about to grab him. Crowstar leapt away just as he heard the she-cat say, "Then what are you waiting for? Kill any cat you find!"

Crowstar sped away, fleeing before the dark fog could reach him, moving and speeding as fast as his paws could carry him. He ached, but he continued without looking back. He felt he could hear the roars in the distance of the shadow, bellowing like thunder. He forgot the shrew he had caught.

He stumbled over pebbles, slippery from ice, only to hurry again and move even faster.

I can't lose another life. He was more determined than ever. *I have to report this to the patrol. I can't allow it to catch me!*

Crowstar was a black bullet jutting through the white of the forest.

He was sure of one thing as he padded forward, processing the events silently.

Tigerstar is not the shadow cat.

***

Tawnypelt yawned from where she was seated beside Brambleclaw. Jessy was on his other side. He was much more comfortable now that Squirrelstar and the patrol had left. Her brother's relaxation had slowly ebbed back to her, relaxing her too, and she found herself enjoying his presence when many other cats were still uncertain of her.

Brambleclaw was normal again, she thought pleasantly.

She had not seen him like this for a long time. He had stopped worrying so much, for one thing. Before he had spent so much of his time checking his prey for poison and asking cats to guard him in his sleep. Sometimes he imagined something was in his food, or he would hear sounds in his sleep and start arguing with the cat who was guarding him.

It was hard for Tawnypelt to watch. So much of her brother seemed lost that she found she couldn't enjoy being around him. But with Squirrelstar gone, everything was different. All of his focus was on Jessy instead of the threat to his life, and it changed his mood. It made him more like the old Brambleclaw she knew and loved. Although she felt hesitant and uncertain about Jessy, she was tired of her brother being plagued by suspicions and letting his imagination drive him wild.

Night fall had descended upon the Clan, and Tawnypelt felt peace as she watched her brother sleep normally for the first time in many moons. The mood of the camp was hopeful, but things were quieting down. Tawnypelt tried to stifle a purr as she heard Jayfeather let out a yowl of outrage as he found Goosefeather sleeping in his nest again.

That's happened too many times to count, she laughed inwardly to herself.

Tawnypelt felt that the change in her brother and the patrol's search for Tigerstar had lifted a huge burden from her chest. In the camp, the mood among the cats was different too. Tawnypelt couldn't help but feel this was the beginning of normalcy. She felt a few sprigs of hope growing among the cats and within herself.

Well, part of her felt that way.

The other part told her otherwise. A voice deep in her told her that something was wrong, even though she wasn't quite sure what it was.

"Tawnypelt?"

Brambleclaw's voice grabbed her attention, and she looked back up

at him.

"What?"

"Are you alright?" Brambleclaw blinked at her, worry shimmering in his gaze, while Jessy examined her claws behind him. It seemed that Brambleclaw had woken Jessy, or she wanted to hear what they were saying. Tawnypelt wasn't sure which it was.

Tawnypelt nodded slowly. "I'm okay, just tired." She rose to her paws. "I'll see you tomorrow. I think I will retire to the warrior's den." She eyed Jessy next to Bramblestar.

Shouldn't she retire somewhere else too? She certainly doesn't look like an elder, but then, she doesn't really fit it in anywhere in the camp.

Brambleclaw waved his tail goodbye as Tawnypelt left, and Tawnypelt nodded in return. Jessy still perturbed her, but she didn't allow the rogue to keep her from sleep.

At least my brother seems better with her. She curled up in her nest inside the warriors' den and slid into soft darkness.

Tawnypelt sat up and found herself staring into round, black, fathomless eyes that seemed like dark tunnels. Tawnypelt was speechless, falling into their bleakness.

The blackness spoke to her. "Tawnypelt." It rumbled. "I have waited to speak to you again."

Its voice frightened her. It was very commanding and powerful. Too powerful. She took a wary step backwards.

The black, misty figured tilted its shape towards her, as if surprised by her reaction.

Tawnypelt was taken aback by it. She hesitated, gazing upon its ghostly figure fearfully.

"Are you the shadow cat who has killed so many cats?" Her voice tried not to quiver.

It shook its head. "No, Tawnypelt. I am your shadow."

Tawnypelt moved towards the shadow. She was mesmerized in the moment, making her forget her fear.

"Then you must know who the shadow cat is. You are like it, so you must know it. Who does it belong to? Does it belong to Tigerstar?"

It shook its head. "It doesn't belong to Tigerstar. You misunderstood."

"Do you know who the shadow cat is? The one who's been killing so many cats?"

"Tawnypelt!" A voice interrupted her.

Tawnypelt jolted up suddenly in her nest, surprised. "What?" She looked around her to find Brambleclaw's amber eyes gleaming upon her. "It's sun high. You should wake now. Come, we can get something from the fresh kill pile together."

Surprised, Tawnypelt peered past him to see sunlight streaming in through the entrance of the warriors den and pushing its way through the cracks in the fern walls.

Bramblestar waited for his sister's response.

"The shadow cat isn't Tigerstar." Tawnypelt sat up, dazed.

"What?"

"I have to tell the Clans now. They must know before something else happens."

Tawnypelt, determined, pushed her way past Brambleclaw and Jessy. The rogue was eyeing her inquisitively, but Tawnypelt didn't even look at her to notice.

She burst through the clearing, the bright rays pounding upon her.

"Every cat, I must speak to you all now!" She yowled commandingly.

Chapter 16

In the gleam of the sunrise, Squirrelstar padded alongside Hawkwing searching for prey. The sun glittered down on the snow, making it shine Iridescently.

The gusty air was bitterly cold and harsh. Ice and snow filled the air, and that was all. Prey seemed to be nonexistent, burrowed away in dark dens, but it didn't seem to bother Squirrelstar or Hawking at all. They talked animatedly and cheerfully despite the terrible weather, walking unusually close to each other.

He makes me forget all my problems, Squirrelstar sighed to herself. *And yet at the same time, he makes many problems for me. What if another cat saw us together or noticed we were spending more time together? What would my Clan say of me then? Now we are all together in the camp, but eventually we will separate, and I will still just be Brambleclaw's mate, a cat who could care less about me and is in love with another cat.*

Her heart ached at the thought.

Hawkwing was gazing upon her with humor in his eyes. *He doesn't seem to notice I am upset about something.*

Obviously, he isn't thinking the same about me as I am about him. Or is he? How can I know?

A light flickered in Hawkwing's eyes as he spoke about leafbare coming to an end. Squirrelstar barely listened as she continued to watch his expressions.

"What do you think, Squirrelstar?"

"What, I mean about what?"

"You weren't listening. I don't blame you. If we chat too much, we will just scare away prey."

"Yes, prey!" Squirrelstar scolded herself inwardly. *I need to stop acting like a kit. What difference does it make if he feels anything for me? He would never leave his Clan, and I won't either. This bonding we've shared will end when we return to our Clan camps.*

Squirrelstar regained her focus as she flicked her tail to a clearing heavily laden with snow. There were a few tempting beech nuts scattered at the roots of an oak tree, and Squirrelstar's ears pricked up eagerly when saw the opportunity.

"I'm going to try over there." Squirrelstar mewed as she padded into the clearing, her paw steps light. Hawkwing watched her from close by with amusement in his eyes.

Squirrelstar paused, alarmed. She stopped in her tracks. *Something is wrong.*

Below her, there was crumbling snow and leaf litter beneath her paws. Her green eyes were wide as she stared down frozen.

"What-" She stopped, suddenly shaking with the uneven ground.

The twigs and snow cracked, then dropped, and Squirrelstar let out a yowl of terror as she felt the ground beneath her paws collapse beneath her weight.

"Squirrelstar!"

Hawkwing leapt forward catching Squirrelstar's scruff just before she fell into the deep pit. Her paws dangled above it, and she trembled as she looked below her. There was nothing but a black and endless hole, its end not visible to the she-cat.

Hawkwing pulled her backwards onto the solid ground, panting. Both cats stood up; their pelts puffed out in alarm.

"Thank you." Squirrelstar murmured. She couldn't meet Hawkwing's gaze as she spoke. Her eyes were fastened on the ditch with its dark, foreboding opening. As she looked at it, her paws trembled. Something about it kept her gaze.

"Look!" Squirrelstar's fur stood up straight in alarm as she padded closer to examine the area. "There are claw marks here along the edges of the hole. This hole was deliberately dug by a cat!" Hawkwing and Squirrelstar met each other's gazes. As Hawkwing examined the edges of the hole, his gaze clouded as he spoke.

"There is only one cat that is targeting the leaders of the Clans now."

Squirrelstar nodded in silent agreement with Hawkwing.

"The shadow cat must have been here." Squirrelstar looked around cautiously. The mood of their outing quickly changed, and the two cats retreated back to camp with very little words.

***

Puddleshine left the comfort of the medicine den early that morning to gather herbs. At least he hoped so.

Cloverfoot had agreed to accompany him for his safety. She watched with weary eyes, scanning the area methodically, as Puddleshine plucked the stems off of the dock leaves. His mood was rather high, and he continued to chatter with Cloverfoot, although she wasn't very interested.

"These dock leaves have been spared because they were under the shelter of this bush." Puddleshine was mewing happily. "This is good news because we were running out. You'd be surprised how many thorns kits and warriors get in their paws every day, and the dock leaves really help them when they..."

Puddleshine looked over at Cloverfoot to notice that the warrior's gaze was distant, distracted, and she was obviously not listening. He stopped speaking.

"I'm sorry Puddleshine. What were you saying? I'm just trying to

keep an eye on Tigerstar. He's wandered off a bit. You know, his mood is not very good now since Dovewing." Cloverfoot met Puddleshine's eyes. Her voice lowered. "He's not doing so well."

"It's okay, I know." Puddleshine's voice softened. "He hasn't been able to sleep for many nights. I have offered him some suggestions and even poppy seeds to sleep, but he insists that a warrior should not get help unless injured."

"I don't want to leave him alone at a time like this." Cloverfoot looked at her leader from an opening in the bushes. He was gazing across the marshy RiverClan territory from a high ledge. Tigerstar knew that he should have been in the camp in case the shadow cat attacked again, but he felt lifeless and unmotivated to do anything. He knew in his heart all he really wanted was to be alone.

I want to forget that I have to be accompanied every where like a kit. He rolled his eyes at the thought. He forced himself to gaze hard upon the snowy marshes, as if he were alone. He tried to block out the sounds.

Mournfully, he sat on the ground. *What am I going to do now that Dovewing is dead*?

Tigerstar knew that StarClan would eventually have to go back to their territory when the shadow was gone, and Dovewing would go with them. *I will be alone with our kits, our Clan. I don't know how to live without her.*

He sighed again, feeling lost in despair.

"What am I going to do without Dovewing?" Tigerstar murmured to himself again- this time out loud. He closed his eyes in pain. No matter how hard he tried to escape, he could hear Puddleshine's cheery voice in the distance as he dotted about gathering herbs.

"Could you carry some of these dock leaves?" Puddleshine's voice was beaming with success in the distance.

Tigerstar glanced over at Cloverfoot and Puddleshine as they distributed dock leaves among each other.

"That should be good." Puddleshine said proudly with a mouthful of leaves.

As he watched Puddleshine and Cloverfoot, Tigerstar heard paw steps behind him.

Strange, I didn't know any cat was with us when we left.

Before he could turn around to confront the cat, he felt himself pushed and thrusted off the ledge, falling fast violently against the speed of the air. The wind whipped his pelt painfully. His paws were flailing, thrashing in all directions, as he tried to grasp unto any object to save himself. But he continued to plunge further down.

"No! Dovewing!" His cry shattered the air, and then was silenced as he thudded down against a tall stalactite that jutted from the ravine's bottom. His eyes were wide with terror, frozen. His body didn't move.

Cloverfoot dropped the dock leaves in her mouth to the ground. She raced to her leader, darting towards the opening between the frosty bushes. Then she halted abruptly.

From the cracks in the leaves, she could see the dark brown pelt of a cat standing where her leader had once stood. Puddleshine followed her from behind. His belly was close to the forest floor, scraping the snow, as he crept forward to peer through the opening with Cloverfoot. They exchanged wide-eyed glances.

The dark brown cat continued to give them their back, oblivious to their presence.

"The shadow cat!"

In a rage, Cloverfoot launched herself from the bushes, ferociously pinning down the cat with her claws unsheathed.

The cat met Cloverfoot's gaze with malice and hostility.

"Jessy!" Cloverfoot spat out the words. Her eyes were fierce. "I should have known a rogue would be behind all of this!"

Puddleshine joined them and looked down upon the body of Tigerstar below. His eyes mournful and solemn.

"I should kill you now!" Cloverfoot screeched. She pressed her claws harder against Jessy getting ready to give her a final blow with her paw.

Puddleshine stopped her, lifting his paw silently.

"Wait, not now. We need to report this first." Puddleshine's voice had dropped. His leader's image remained in his mind as both cats dragged Jessy back to camp.

***

Squirrelstar and Hawkwing had gathered all cats in the camp. They were explaining to them the threat to Squirrelstar's life when Cloverfoot dragged a squirming, writhing Jessy by the tail into the clearing. Behind her, Puddleshine followed and a starry, ghostly version of Tigerstar.

All the cats jumped to their paws, alarmed, yowling.

"Tigerstar! No!" Shadowsight cried out, anguished. He raced to his father's starry side. Many questions were in his eyes as he searched his face. Tigerstar's eyes looked upon his son with heartache. They exchanged words that couldn't be heard by the other cats.

"What has happened here?" Firestar's voice boomed as he stepped forward.

Jessy flailed her paws, unsheathing her claws, swinging them hysterically and uselessly at Cloverfoot. Cloverfoot tugged Jessy by the tail into the center of the clearing, ignoring her attempts to escape.

"Cloverfoot! What are you doing to Jessy?!"

An outraged Brambleclaw yowled, storming from the entrance of the elders' den where he'd been chewing a squirrel. His mouth was full as he spoke, and he pushed cats aside to get over to Jessy.

Much to his dismay, the sheer numbers of cats blocked his way. Many of them had a mixture of curiosity in their eyes; some of them were amused as they blinked at Jessy's weakness. Others were bursting with rage, boiling and ready to explode.

Tawnypelt let out a long, low hiss and proceeded to stomp towards Jessy and Cloverfoot. Her eyes were blinded by anger and a touch of sadness as she saw her son's starry body.

"Tell this bee-brain to get off of me!" Jessy hissed as Cloverfoot pinned her down in the center of the camp.

Brambleclaw pushed his way through the crowd and scowled furiously at Cloverfoot. "Get off of her now!"

"This cat," Cloverfoot gave Jessy a disgusted snarl. "pushed Tigerstar off the edge of a cliff, and I brought her here to kill her. But first, I wanted you all to know who is behind the killings. You have killed many warriors and StarClan cats. You don't deserve to live!" Cloverfoot growled at Jessy.

Angry mews echoed through the clearing as ShadowClan cats stared at Jessy, their eyes full of hostility. They were pacing, all of them eager to pounce on the rogue she-cat at the same time.

"You're lying!" Jessy growled, her voice came out muffled from Cloverfoot's hold on her.

"Let her speak." Firestar stood before Jessy. Cloverfoot nodded towards Snaketooth and Yarrowleaf to block the exit of the camp so Jessy couldn't escape. But she glanced at Firestar with narrowed eyes.

"Jessy would never kill a Clan leader!" Brambleclaw yowled above the hisses coming from the watching cats. His brown, tabby head tried to peer through and push his way over to Jessy without success.

Jayfeather's cold, blank stare watched from the medicine den.

"Doesn't any cat find it strange that Squirrelstar was almost killed the same day Tigerstar was killed?" Jayfeather meowed above the

voices.

"I did not see her." Tigerstar's spirit spoke first. "I can't be sure it was her. But I trust Cloverfoot's judgement. She was very close, and she was watching me on the ledge most of the time."

"And I saw her!" Cloverfoot nearly jumped on Jessy again, but several cats restrained her. "I saw her standing over the ledge where Tigerstar was. And so did Puddleshine."

Puddleshine nodded silently.

"When Tigerstar was pushed off, I heard his cry. She was the only cat there when I arrived at the spot. She was staring down at him, looking down upon his dead body, and doing absolutely nothing. It was like she was enjoying herself!"

All the cats yowled.

Brambleclaw intervened. "Perhaps Jessy was near the area. She heard Tigerstar's cry and went to see what happened. You didn't actually see her push him off."

All the cats stared Brambleclaw down silent.

"Jessy wouldn't harm another cat." His voice was panicked as he realized no one was agreeing with him.

Squirrelstar was too busy looking at Jessy. The hostility and resentment were clear in her eyes. Even though Jessy's life was threatened by so many cats, she showed no remorse. She even had the audacity to have her claws unsheathed after standing over Tigerstar's dead body.

Squirrelstar stared at her with unsheathed claws, remembering the night when her and Hawkwing had seen a cat put the sign of Tigerstar under the moon. It had been a single claw. And now, as Squirrelstar's gaze lingered at Jessy's front paw, she froze.

Jessy felt her stare and sheathed her claws uncomfortably. She looked away from Squirrelstar's stare.

She's missing a claw, Squirrelstar murmured to herself silently.

"She's missing a claw." Squirrelstar said it in a low voice. Lionblaze was near her. "What did you say?" He turned to face her.

Squirrelstar raised her voice again. "She is missing a claw. Don't all of you remember the claw we found that was suppose to be the sign of Tigerstar?"

"And then we found that it wasn't Tigerstar at all." Crowstar added thoughtfully.

"I remember I saw a dark pelt, amber eyes. It was you!" Squirrelstar's fur bushed up, infuriated. "I knew from the beginning that you would only bring us problems!"

"Show us your paws and unsheathe them!" Cloverfoot demanded.

Jessy looked around at the cats haughtily. Her muzzle slammed shut in defiance.

"Do it now!" Tawnypelt roared, lunging on the she-cat, pinning her down tightly. Firestar glared down upon the she-cat. Tawnypelt unsheathed her claws, threatening her, but Jessy turned her head away. Tawnypelt slowly scratched Jessy until the rogue she-cat closed her eyes, unsheathing her claws unwilfully with a glare.

The cats gasped. Sure enough, there was a paw with a claw missing.

"I knew it!" Jayfeather yowled arrogantly from the medicine den.

Brambleclaw tried to race towards Jessy. "I will not believe the word of Squirrelstar. Just because she saw a dark pelt..." His voice was drowned.

Firestar turned to look at the tom. "Brambleclaw, she is missing a claw. She is the only cat missing a claw. She removed it, and planted it as a sign of Tigerstar."

"And then she killed a leader." Cloverfoot's voice darkened.

"Tawnypelt, let her go. We need to speak with her. I know you are

upset, but you need to let her go, so we can speak with her." Firestar commanded.

Leafpool padded towards Tawnypelt. "What's wrong, Tawnypelt?"

The tortoiseshell cat's eyes were closed, winced painfully. She had lessened her grip on Jessy, but she couldn't seem to move.

"Tawnypelt, can you hear me?" she prodded gently.

"The pain- I can't handle it." Tawnypelt slid down to sit on Jessy, squishing the she-cat's legs. Her eyes remained squeeze shut as she put her head down.

Jessy yowled out in pain as Tawnypelt's weight pressed on her. None of the cats cared.

"Where is the pain?" Leafpool tried to nudge Tawnypelt to check her responsiveness.

"Should we take her to the medicine den?" Alderheart looked at Leafpool anxiously.

"No, there's no need." Tawnypelt spoke briskly. She opened her eyes. "I'm alright now." She breathed deeply trying to push away the pain.

"Where did you feel the pain? Do you feel ill?" Leafpool's voice was full of concern.

"My head, I don't know what happened. I just felt like it would burst."

Leafpool's eyes widened, but Tawnypelt continued before she became more alarmed. "It's gone now."

"If you feel it again, come and I can check you." Leafpool spoke sternly.

Tawnypelt's eyes were focused on Tigerstar in the distance. He had joined Dovewing's spirit. Their muzzles were brushed together as they curled up side by side.

He seems to have forgotten what is going on. Tawnypelt couldn't feel anger towards her son, only pity.

"This she-cat must be punished for killing a Clan leader." Crowstar's voice was seething. "I am sure she tried to kill me too, didn't you?!" He was nearly jumping on Jessy now.

Jessy looked at the cats, getting ready to speak. She looked rather confident and smug. "I'm not telling any cat anything!"

Brambleclaw's voice interrupted Crowstar's questioning. "Jessy is innocent!" he wailed. " A missing claw proves nothing!"

"She must be the shadow cat." Crowstar narrowed his eyes down at Jessy, his blue gaze baleful.

"I'd certainly love to have that power." She muttered wistfully, then added in a much louder voice, "But I'm not the shadow cat." She lifted her head arrogantly and didn't meet the gazes of the other cats.

"She's obviously lying." Breezepelt stalked forward, hissing. "She's lying to cover up for herself! Trying to cover her tracks!"

"Rogues only make problems! She is probably behind all the problems in the Clans!" Thornclaws's pelt bristled, irritated.

"The shadow cat wouldn't admit their guilt even if they were caught." Mothwing agreed, her gaze narrowed thoughtfully as she studied Jessy. "She does not respect the way of the Clans like the rest of us."

"It makes sense." Tigerstar's spirit stepped forward.

Jessy scowled at Mothwing then turned her scornful gaze to the crowd of cats. "I'm not the shadow cat." She insisted. "You can all believe what you want, but it won't change the truth."

"Wait!" Jayfeather intercepted Breezepelt, just as he was going to lunge at Jessy and tear her apart. "There's an easy way to see if she's telling the truth. After all, we can't trust her words."

"Yes." Thornclaw mewed. "By killing her."

"She killed my son." Tawnypelt stared at her frostily. "She should die."

"No." Jayfeather glared at Thornclaw. "We must use this situation to our advantage. Jessy is here with us. Whether or not she is the shadow cat, she might have information that could help us. Maybe she is the shadow cat. In order to know, we should ask Tawnypelt's shadow."

His blind stare met Tawnypelt's stunned gaze. Jayfeather continued, his eyes piercing her as if he could see her. "If Tawnypelt's shadow cat told her Tigerstar wasn't the shadow cat, surely it can tell us if Jessy is the shadow cat."

All the cats in the camp started to nod in agreement, looking upon Jayfeather with approval. Only Tawnypelt didn't react the same. She frowned with concern.

"I'm not sure it works like that, Jayfeather. I have never summoned the shadow before. It just came to me."

"You could try." Ivypool mewed.

"It would help us to know what to do with this rogue." Breezepelt's narrowed eyes scanned Jessy over in a disgusted manner.

"You talk to it in your sleep, don't you?" Crowstar demanded, not waiting for an answer. "So as soon as you fall asleep, ask it."

"It talks to me. Many times I don't even see it." Tawnypelt protested.

Jessy turned her dark head to meet Tawnypelt with a sly smirk in her eyes. "You'll find I'm innocent." She sniffed haughtily.

"If I find that you are the shadow cat, I will personally line my nest with all your fur. And I mean it." Breezepelt towered over her menacingly. "You will wish you never laid a paw on Heathertail."

Brambleclaw finally reached Jessy, and the other cats looked at him incredulously as he put his head on hers. Jessy's glare remained

fierce as Brambleclaw tried to comfort her. She didn't notice his attempts to console her.

"We will set up a den for Tawnypelt." Firestar declared, taking control of the center of the camp. "We will wait till she speaks to this shadow, then we will see what to do with you." His tone was dark as she looked down at Jessy.

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Tawnypelt watched, trying to stifle a purr as Dawnpelt stuffed moss, feathers, bracken, and a few dried leaves into her nest.

"I'm trying to keep it as dry as possible. Firestar has given clear instructions to every cat that you should be as comfortable as possible."

"It won't do any good. It has been several days now, and I still have not seen the shadow."

Tawnypelt was distraught. *I'm letting my Clan down, my son down, and all the Clans, for that matter. Everyone.*

Dawnpelt continued finished fluffing out the bedding for Tawnypelt's nest. Then she sniffed the wall and slightly shivered. "There's a draft in here. It's no wonder it's not working. You probably get too cold in the middle of the night. I will be back to fetch something-"

"No!" Tawnypelt said firmly. *I'm really tired of this. I am not an elder. Why can't every cat see that?*

"I don't need special treatment." Tawnypelt's voice was final.

Her eyes were firm as she looked upon her daughter.

"I don't need all that to sleep."

"Is Tawnypelt asleep yet?" Flametail yowled loudly from where he was sniffing a few herbs.

"She won't be if you keep meowing so loudly." Dawnpelt snorted.

Tawnypelt blinked at her kits, feeling a sudden rush of affection. As much as she hated the special treatment, she didn't mind the attention she was getting from her kits.

I didn't realize how much I missed them.

"Sorry." Flametail whispered, and Tawnypelt's whiskers twitched in amusement. *Some kits never change even when they are warriors*, she thought humorously to herself.

"I'll leave now," Dawnpelt added as she slipped out of the den.

Of course, once she leaves I won't be able to sleep, Tawnypelt grumbled inwardly. Her mind tried to remember the dream of her father. His urgent stare, his words that were so important he couldn't finish. *Why would he come to me when he isn't the shadow?* Shadowsight had told her many times before that sometimes dreams were symbols.

She sighed.

At a time like this, we don't need symbols.

She closed her eyes, remembering her father. His dark, rugged pelt. It had looked darker than usual. His bright amber eyes were amused- no, not amused. Fierce, like he was hunting her. Glowing in the heat of the hunt.

Tawnypelt stood up, disappointment weighing heavily in her paws. She shook her head. *The Clans will be disappointed again too.* She stretched out her legs, preparing to fetch something from the fresh kill pile.

I wasn't able to speak to my shadow cat. Mouse-dung! Why does it have to be so difficult!

Tawnypelt let out a yowl of shock and took a step back against the den wall. She found her shadow cat sitting a few inches away, its tail curled neatly around the shadowy form of its paws. It was blocking the exit of the den.

Blinking curiously at her, the shadow cat seemed to be anticipating for her to speak.

Confused, Tawnypelt looked around and realized that the walls of the den were blurry and unfocused, and when she pressed her paw against the ground, she only felt a numb, distant touch.

I'm dreaming. Finally. I must speak to it before I wake.

Suddenly, the shadow cat meowed.

"Tawnypelt."

It sounded more like a question than a statement though, as if it was questioning itself, unsure of whether she was indeed Tawnypelt. Tawnypelt brushed off the strange tone, focused on only one question. She knew she didn't want to lose the opportunity and wait again for it to return.

"I need to ask you something." Tawnypelt mewed hurriedly.

Her shadow cat dipped its head. "I know. I'm a part of you, remember? I can tell what you feel, and occasionally, I can see your thoughts." The shadow cat turned its head, staring off into the distance with inky black eyes. "Sometimes I feel lonely, and your thoughts give me comfort."

Tawnypelt's eyes widened in disbelief. *You have feelings*? Tawnypelt thought dubiously, but was too rushed to ask. *There will be another time to find out more about this part of me I don't understand*.

"Is the shadow cat- is it Jessy?" She waited looking anxiously at the shadow cat.

The shadow cat turned to her. *Could it be trusted?* Tawnypelt felt a wary wave rush over her. The silence seemed to stretch for an eternity. Impatience and worry itched beneath Tawnypelt's pelt, and she began to stomp her paws to the ground.

Hurry, before I wake up!

Then, just as Tawnypelt was about to ask what was taking so long, her shadow cat finally replied.

"No." It mewed simply, its blank gaze clouded thoughtfully. "But

she's not being entirely truthful. For she knows who the shadow cat is. She knows everything."

"Are you sure Jessy isn't the shadow cat?" Tawnypelt hesitated, still somewhat surprised.

"I'm quite certain," It replied confidently, its voice almost melting into a purr, but was too guttural and unearthly to manage one.

"Did she kill Tigerstar?" Tawnypelt knew she should not ask, but she had to know for her son and her Clan.

"Yes, she killed Tigerstar. And she also tried to kill Squirrelstar. But she does not have the power of the shadow."

"Then who does?" Tawnypelt asked, her heart pounding and the blood roaring in her ears. *I've almost reached the answer to all our problems.*

If her shadow cat heard her, it didn't respond. Instead, it suddenly snapped back as if its attention had been lost. Its gaze became intense and its voice urgent. "Tawnypelt, you have-"

Suddenly, the walls of the den melted and shifted. The ground fell away beneath Tawnypelt's paws as she jerked upwards, alarmed.

Dawnpelt, Flametail, Clan leaders, and multiple deputies were standing around Tawnypelt cramped into the small space. They looked at her silently with anticipation.

Tawnypelt couldn't stop the annoyance bubbling in her chest as they stared at her. She was fuming at the way they were hovering around her.

"Couldn't you have woken me up later? It was about to tell me something important!"

She began to pace in front of them, taking a few available steps. She was too frustrated to meet their gazes now.

Dawnpelt blinked anxiously. "We were worried about you, Tawnypelt. You've been asleep for two days. We had to keep Jessy

in a spare den with a few guards because we didn't know what to do with her. After your pain in your head, we didn't know if you were unwell."

"I am fine." Tawnypelt tried not to snap, but her voice was curt.

Crowstar shouldered his way to the front of the group, his gaze urgent. "What did it say to you?"

"Is Jessy the shadow cat?" Cloverfoot asked Tawnypelt. She met her eyes.

Brambleclaw tried to squeeze into the cramped den. "I've already told you all she isn't the-" The rest of Brambleclaw's sentence was muffled as Hawkwing slapped his tail over his muzzle. "Be quiet and listen!"

Tawnypelt took a deep breath. "The shadow cat is not Jessy. But she killed Tigerstar. She tried to kill you." She met Squirrelstar's eyes as she spoke. "And she can tell us who the shadow cat is."

The Clan leaders exchanged glances. "Very well, Tawnypelt." Firestar murmured.

"Let's be finished with this rogue once and for all." Crowstar muttered.

"I will kill her personally when we are done with her." Cloverfoot said with a hint of pleasure.

"No!" Brambleclaw roared. He rushed away to where Jessy was being held by the cats. He pushed his way into the den, while the other cats came swarming from behind him, thirsty for revenge.

Chapter 17

Cats followed Brambleclaw with their eyes as they saw him crying out, dashing towards Jessy's den where she was being watched. None of them could speak as they watched his panicked frenzy. Some of them exchanged wide-eyed glances. Following him shortly from behind was a furious mass of cats moving as one with their immense rage. As the noise spread through the camp, and into the dens, many cats watched with curiosity while others peered out of their dens anxiously.

"What is all this noise about?" Cloudtail tumbled out of his den, briefly glancing over at the fresh kill pile.

Crowstar nearly knocked him over as he pounded past him.

Brambleclaw stopped as he reached the entrance of the den. He turned to face the group of enraged cats from all Clans.

"I will not let any of you harm her." He looked from one cat's face to another stubbornly.

"Brambleclaw, please." Firestar's voice was a bit exasperated. "We have no intention to harm her. We just need to question her. This is for your Clan, Brambleclaw, and for Tigerstar."

Brambleclaw didn't move. "I don't believe it's for my Clan. I think all of you are taking the word of Squirrelstar. That's it. And now you are basing your assumptions-"

"Move over now, Brambleclaw." Tawnypelt's voice was cold, final. "I have spoken to my shadow. This is ridiculous. She is just a rogue, and Squirrelstar is your mate!"

All the cats in the camp gasped. They started to gather around the angry army of cats and Brambleclaw, forming a circle around them. The kits tried to pounce forth too, but their mothers pushed them back.

"If you don't move Brambleclaw, I will have to move you by force." Tigerstar's eyes were narrowed slits. "I deserve justice for my death and for Dovewing's."

ShadowClan cats began to speak loudly, yowling in agreement with their leader. Brambleclaw hesitated, but he couldn't look Tigerstar or Tawnypelt in the eyes. His gaze wavered off into the distance

"What is that smell? Oh no-" The voice of a cat in the camp was cut off suddenly. A skittering noise was heard all around the cats. Danger was in the air.

"Foxes!" Leafstar cried out. "Their scent is getting stronger!"

Deep within the shadows of the bushes, the yellow eyes gleamed with malice, and their numbers continued to grow.

"Every cat be prepared to attack! Protect the kits!" Just as Crowstar spoke, a fox came to him from behind, twisting in the air, and sank its teeth deep into his neck.

"Crowstar!" Feathertail sped over to him and jumped at the fox, swiping at it and biting down on its leg hard. It made a whining noise as it fell to the ground and scurried away.

Crowstar's voice was gurgling and low. It could hardly be heard over the sound of the foxes whining and barking. Their orange pelts burned under the glow of the morning sun, so many of them jumping and dashing swiftly in anger.

"Leafpool! Come quickly!" Feathertail's voice was panicked. Crowstar's gaze did not meet hers as his voice gurgled, blood oozing from the wound in his neck.

A fox jumped on Feathertail's starry figure as she spoke, but she swung it off, slashing it with her claws until it ran away.

Firestar was running through the camp, clawing the foxes as they attempted to jump on top of him. Several of them gathered around him, and one managed to grab him by the tail. Another one pierced his back with its teeth, while the other one continued to grab him by the tail. Squirrelstar dashed over to the foxes, shoving them off from her father, then slashing at them until they scurried away. Their barks were filling the camp as if they were mocking the cats. Their sound bounced off the air and echoed as an ominous threat.

Leafpool, with Jayfeather's help, carried Crowstar to the medicine den. But when her back was turned, a fox grabbed her by the leg, its teeth pulling her away from the medicine den. Crowstar lunged from Jayfeather's grip suddenly. Jayfeather was stunned as he moved with such force despite his injury. He attempted to jump on the fox feebly, but his fury was so great it caught the fox off guard. Scared, it whined and moved away from the dark warrior, not expecting him to still be alive.

Crowstar tried to guide Leafpool to the medicine den with Jayfeather, but the gurgling noise in this throat continued, and he collapsed.

"Quickly, he is losing too much blood!" Jayfeather yowled. Kestrelflight raced out of the medicine den along with Alderheart. They carried the two injured cats to the medicine den.

Feathertail's starry gaze was filled with fury as she leapt through the air, crashing down upon fox after fox. Her anger for the two cats she loved propelled her forward. She glittered and moved like a silver wind, twirling and spinning, as she attacked with fierce vengeance.

The foxes only remained a few, and they became suddenly aware of the threat on them. They leapt back into the protection of the forest, still barking threateningly at the cats. Several cats, including Tigerstar, Breezepelt, Hawkwing, Squirrelstar, and Firestar lunged after them, following them into the white maze of snow.

When they left, Brambleclaw came out from the elders' den and padded quietly over to where Jessy was. No cat seemed to notice.

All of them are chasing foxes or helping the wounded, he thought gratefully. He entered the den. It was musty, stuffy, and dreary. He shivered. The blackness and emptiness suffocated him, threatening to overwhelm him. A painful ache grew in his chest.

"Jessy?" He sniffed for her, but he couldn't find her.

Oh Jessy, he moaned to himself. *She must have escaped during the fox attack!* He panicked. *I have to find her!*

Brambleclaw looked around the camp, checking his surroundings carefully. Then he disappeared into the bushes alone.

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"No!" Squirrelstar yowled in anger. "Where did she go? Did any cat see her?"

After returning from chasing the foxes off, the cats had gathered in the camp again. Jessy was nowhere to be found.

"That piece of-" Breezepelt was interrupted as Nightcloud glided over to his side. Her eyes were wide and expressive.

"I think you should check on your father." She looked at her son meaningfully. Breezepelt hesitated, caught in the heat of the moment.

"Remember what he did for you when you were injured by the stoats?" Breezepelt sniffed the air. All the cats were staring at him. He padded to the medicine den with Heathertail joining him, brushing against his side soothingly.

"How could any cat allow her to escape!" Tawnypelt's anger was so strong she was shaking. "Where is- where is Brambleclaw?"

"He's not in the elders' den." Thornclaw snorted. "You know what that means."

"Oh for StarClan's sake! Do I have to have such a flea-brained brother?! We must track them and find them."

"Tawnypelt," Squirrelstar began. "There are many injured cats, including Firestar and Leafpool. I can't leave the camp now to go on a search patrol."

"Then if no cat will go with me, I will go by myself." Tawnypelt's tone was hard.

"I will go with you." Tigerstar's spirit spoke.

"No, it is too risky. You don't have any lives." Tawnypelt's gaze darkened and her voice dropped.

"Let's wait Tawnypelt, at least till some warriors have recovered." Leafstar suggested.

"No, her scent will be harder to find. I will go now."

"What about the shadow-" Dawnpelt began and stopped when her mother stared at her.

"I am not afraid of the shadow cat." Tawnypelt tilted her head.

"I will join you." Dawnpelt added, hesitantly.

"So will I," Lightleap added.

The three cats lingered near the camp as they attempted to scent for Jessy and Brambleclaw, then they left. Several cats watched them as they disappeared in the distance.

The cats dispersed in the camp. Squirrelstar went to the medicine den immediately. Hawkwing tried to follow her, but as he approached the medicine den, he could hear Jayfeather exploding in rage.

"All of you out now!" He roared.

"Please." Squirrelstar peeped her furry head at the entrance of the den. "Please, Jayfeather let me in. I won't be long." Her green eyes were devasted.

"There are too many of you. You, you need to get out. And you too."

As he spoke, he began to nudge Breezepelt and Nightcloud out. "You saw, now you leave." He grumbled to Feathertail and nudged her out. "If any more cats come into this den-"

"Sandstorm get out now! I know you are over there." Sandstorm's glistening form moved out of the medicine den. She couldn't meet Squirrelstar's gaze, her eyes stuck to the ground in desolation.

Squirrelstar interrupted him, remaining at the entrance of the den stubbornly. "Jayfeather, as your Clan leader, you must let me pass." Jayfeather hesitated in the middle of the den. "Oh fine. I got most of them out. But don't make a lot of noise."

Squirrelstar lightly padded into the medicine den, her paws resting near her sister and father. To her delight, Leafpool's breathing was strong and steady.

"She is resting." Jayfeather's voice was low as he spoke. "Please keep her that way."

"Jayfeather-" Jayfeather turned to glare at Alderheart.

"You don't need to finish what you were going to say." He turned his back sharply on Alderheart and began chewing leaves.

Alderheart padded to his mother, pressing his muzzle close to hers as they both watched on.

Hawkwing remained at the entrance peaking at Squirrelstar secretly. An anxious look was in his eyes as he watched Squirrelstar painfully.

In the distance, Leafstar narrowed her gaze and padded over to sit next to him. "I need to talk to you. Let's go share something from the fresh kill pile."

Hawkwing took one last look at Squirrelstar, pausing, as he joined his leader and padded away.

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The evening arrived in the camp. The moon was a sickly yellow

color, full in the bleak, cold sky. A few drops of rain sprinkled. The cats were quiet and anxious. Most of them were in their dens. Several of them stopped in front of the medicine den in curiosity, only to be frightened away by Jayfeather's sudden blank stare.

Squirrelstar remained hovered over Firestar and Leafpool. Her gaze fixated on both of them. She had managed to leave the medicine den briefly. She knew she could not stay with them all the time. But whenever she spoke to her Clanmates, her heart was elsewhere. Alderheart had reassured her that Leafpool was stable, but he wasn't sure about Firestar. His injury in his back was continuing to bleed, although it was less, it wouldn't stop.

Crowstar was awake, sitting up in his nest after losing another life. Squirrelstar felt sorry for him as she watched him. He was well now, but he was miserable and torn. She knew that he was not leaving the medicine den because of Leafpool. Every time he thought Squirrelstar wasn't looking, Crowstar's broken eyes would fall on Leafpool. Then when he thought Squirrelstar or any other cat was looking, he would look away, ashamed.

What a terrible way to live- not free to love. I don't want to live like that, Squirrelstar thought to herself. *I want to be able to love without shame.*

But isn't that how I am now with Brambleclaw? I can't love him freely any more. Her thoughts wandered, remembering her memories with Brambleclaw, her kits, her Clan. *Would I be able to love without shame with Hawkwing? No*, she thought to herself. *It would never happen. All the shame of my Clan would be upon me.*

"Alderheart said she's stable." Squirrelstar attempted to speak to Crowstar to break the pain of her thoughts. Her voice was hesitant, distant.

"That's good to hear. I am sure you are relieved." Crowstar looked ahead, nonchalantly sniffing in the air.

"Leafpool!" Squirrelstar's voice gushed. Leafpool's eyes were so warm and loving as she looked upon our sister, as if they were melting despite the cold weather. "We can't ever be separated,

remember? I will always be with you, Squirrelstar." The two sisters brushed their muzzles against each other.

"What happened?!" Leafpool shot up abruptly in her nest as she looked at Firestar.

"He's badly injured." Squirrelstar's voice was desperate. "I keep hoping he will wake up and he doesn't."

Leafpool moved from her nest, only to gasp in pain. She inhaled sharply.

"Don't move." Jayfeather rolled his eyes. "You should know better as a medicine cat."

Leafpool and Squirrelstar noticed Jayfeather's fur was smoothed and relaxed in a happy way as he spoke.

"I am so glad you are better, Leafpool. Let me get you some fresh kill." Squirrelstar left the den, leaving Leafpool's steady gaze on her father.

"How do you feel Crowstar?" Her head turned to look at Crowstar, who awkwardly looked away to avoid her gaze.

"I am fine. I just lost a life." His voice was lifeless. "Again."

Leafpool's gaze dropped. Crowstar moved from his nest, stretching as he did so. He stopped by Leafpool's nest, hesitating as she looked up at him.

"Maybe you should leave now that you are well?" Jayfeather spun around to glare at him before he could speak to Leafpool.

Crowstar rolled his eyes as he left the medicine den.

I wonder where he gets that from...

A hint of humor glistened in his eyes as he padded away.

Chapter 18

Tawnypelt padded through the snowy RiverClan marshes, reeds brushing against her flank as Dawnpelt and Lightleap followed. There was an eerie mist rising from the ground that tingled their paws. The night air was unclear and heavy for the cats. They moved through white dusted bushes and reeds, frantically trying to find the scent of the two cats.

"Brambleclaw's scent is here," Dawnpelt flicked her tail to the oak of a tree. The other two came to join her. Tawnypelt inhaled and nodded. "Good. That means we're on the right track."

Tawnypelt tried to prepare herself for how she would feel when she saw Brambleclaw. Deep inside of her, her patience was wearing. Jessy had infiltrated the camp with chaos and problems, and he was so blind he couldn't see through any of it. She was afraid she might explode on him. Just the thought of him sitting with the traitor, the killer of her son made her feel a rush of heat all over.

How could he allow the cat who knew the shadow cat, who murdered my son, to escape? I know he thinks he has feelings for her, but what about his feelings for me? For our kin?

The more I think about it, his head is getting fuller and fuller of bees! Nothing he does makes sense.

Dawnpelt interrupted her thinking. "Brambleclaw! He's over there!" A few fox lengths away, Brambleclaw and Jessy were nestled together under the shade of an overhanging rock. "They don't seem to notice us approaching." Tawnypelt whispered.

"That mouse-brained piece of fox dung didn't even leave RiverClan territory after what she did to Tigerstar! How dare she! I wish we could kill her now." Dawnpelt glared at Jessy.

"Patience, Dawnpelt. She will get what is coming to her soon." Tawnypelt's eyes were as cold as the night air.

Suddenly, the two sleeping cats started to move, and their eyes cracked open lazily. Immediately Jessy noticed Tawnypelt and the other two cats. Her amber eyes widened, and her fur bristled as she rose to her paws. Brambleclaw looked at her worryingly, till he followed her gaze and found the other cats watching them. His fur bristled, and he moved to place himself protectively in front of Jessy.

"You're coming back to camp with us." Tawnypelt met Jessy's defiant gaze with a steely one of her own. "You have no choice. You can't run any where now."

"None of you will lay a claw on Jessy!" Brambleclaw declared. "I will not allow her to leave with you until I am sure she will be safe.

Dawnpelt narrowed her eyes at Jessy. "She killed my brother. I'll do whatever I like to her. You do not have a say in the matter."

"No," Tawnypelt looked at her daughter. "We are not interested in harming her. We just want to take her back to the Clans. We have a right to find out what she knows about the shadow. It could save all the Clans. And you have to remember your Clan, Brambleclaw. Not everything is Jessy."

Brambleclaw went silent. Dawnpelt grunted, and Lightleap's tail tip twitched ominously, but neither of them moved.

Surprisingly, before any more words could be said, Jessy's fur relaxed, and she padded up to Tawnypelt confidently.

"If you want to take me, take me." Her expression was smug, and Tawnypelt didn't like it in the least.

*****

The moment Tawnypelt, Dawnpelt, and Lightleap brought Jessy and Brambleclaw back into the camp, an uproar erupted. Noisy, bristled cats of all colors were seething with hatred towards the rogue, whispering or yowling in outrage. Some of them had looks of

pleasure in their eyes as if they anticipated the she-cat's punishment.

Squirrelstar's infuriated glare was full of disbelief and disgust. It burned into Jessy's pelt. Jessy looked back at her in return, smirking at her mockingly. Her eyes were lit with amusement. Squirrelstar could not understand how any cat could be amused by so much chaos and hatred.

Tigerstar pushed the cats aside and began to run towards Jessy. It took several cats from other Clans to keep him calm and stop him from lunging on her.

"Finally." Breezepelt whispered under his breath. His eyes were eager, almost excited.

With Firestar in the medicine den, someone needed to remind the cats of what the original plans were. The anger and hostility easily swallowed them up, making them forget what they had agreed upon. Every cat was so used to Firestar speaking, but now another cat needed to remind them of the situation.

Crowstar moved to the center of all the cats, deciding he would be the one. He looked upon each cat as he spoke.

"You all remember what we were planning to do with this rogue. I know the wait is hard for many of us, but we must first get information from her before we kill her."

Tigerstar rolled his eyes. "I know she killed me, so she needs to die." But Dovewing's soft eyes met his, simmering his temper in a brief moment.

"Alright." Tigerstar padded forward to the rogue less aggressively, his pelt smoothing out.

"Who is the shadow cat? Tell us now." Tigerstar waited for her answer. His tail swiped back and forth impatiently.

He was a force of fury despite his glistening form. He looked more stormy than he did starry.

Jessy's eyes were filled with laughter. She didn't seem to take him seriously, and she was rather amused by his question. Her voice was very short and light as she spoke.

"I don't have to tell you anything."

Breezepelt snorted. "If you are not going to tell us anything, then I guess there's no use for you!"

Jessy then turned mockingly towards Breezepelt. "None of you can hurt me." She said it very matter-of-factly.

Breezepelt eyes glared back at her. "I will have no problem hurting you."

"I'll help." Thornclaw offered darkly. His eyes glittered as he spoke.

"No, none of you can hurt me." Her eyes were proud, gleaming, as she looked at all the cats surrounding her, announcing loudly and clearly.

"I am carrying Brambleclaw's kits, and I have agreed with Brambleclaw that we will stay with the Clans and raise our kits as ThunderClan kits."

Several groans were heard around the camp, and Squirrelstar let out a long, low breath. Many cats shook their heads in disgust and disagreement. The words "code" and "rogue" were whispered, but Jessy didn't care if she was accepted. Their opinions didn't matter to her. She looked like a cat who had all the fresh kill pile to herself.

"Jessy, this is wonderful news!" Brambleclaw cried out joyfully, cracking the disapproval in the air from the cats around him. He ran to Jessy's side. His face was lit up like a thousand moons.

Reedstar stared at them, horrified by the two cats. He shook his head. His eyes were wary. "No, she could be lying. A medicine cat should check her."

"Please have a medicine cat check her. We don't have time for this." Crowstar grumbled.

Leaftail went to fetch Kestrelflight from the medicine den. It took him some time, but eventually Kestrelflight came out. He was looking quite anxious with all eyes on him. His plump, fluffy pelt seemed restless with the tension in the air.

He padded over to Jessy, feeling her belly with his paws. He listened carefully, tilting his head towards her stomach. After a few seconds, he sighed. His eyes were broken with sadness. "She is with kits." He couldn't help but shake his head as he padded back to the medicine den.

Whispers shot out from all directions.

"What does this mean for the Clans?"

"We don't want her kits to be born on our territory!" One Riverclan warrior yowled.

Tigerstar's starry spirit spoke above all the mews, silencing them. He seemed to be on fire as he spoke.

"It doesn't matter if Jessy is with kits." He hissed the words from his mouth. "She needs to pay for the consequences of her actions."

"I agree, but we can't kill her when she is with kits." Leafstar shook her head. "She has done much wrong to us, but we can't commit such a grave crime because of the wrongs she committed. We are Clan cats. We aren't like her."

"Well, I certainly can carry out what needs to be done." Tigerstar narrowed his glowing amber eyes.

"No, that is mouse-brained! We can't kill her kits!" Squirrelstar's green eyes were wide with shock as she blinked at Tigerstar.

"Why not?" Tigerstar seemed genuinely puzzled. "Why are you both so upset?"

"Her kits are innocent!" Squirrelstar sounded exasperated. "We as Clan cats protect innocent lives, and kits are innocent."

"They haven't done anything wrong." Leafstar agreed.

"Yet!" Reedstar lashed his tail as he corrected them. "But with kin like Jessy, they will eventually make nothing but trouble. There is no hope for them."

Leafpool interjected, limping as she padded towards the center of the camp. "Please, I will keep watch over Jessy and take care of her. She will not be a problem for any of the cats."

She looked down at the rogue who was quite satisfied. No cat was responding to her so Leafpool continued.

"It will give us a chance to question her. I, and the other medicine cats, cannot watch innocent kits be killed. We don't approve of it." Her eyes were pleading, as the medicine cats behind her nodded their head silently.

"It's true, unfortunately." Jayfeather agreed. "But she won't be with kits forever."

"And how can we make sure her kits don't turn out like her?" Breezepelt tilted his head challengingly.

"They will have Bramblestar's blood. Perhaps if they are raised by another cat, they will turn out alright. They can be raised as Clan cats." Crowstar meowed slowly.

"Half-Clan cats!" Huffed Thornclaw, whipping his tail. "This is a disgrace to every ThunderClan cat."

Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Jayfeather glared at Thornclaw. He immediately shut up as he felt the heat of their gazes.

"Innocent kits are not a disgrace to ThunderClan." Squirrelstar turned her head as she spoke to Thornclaw coldly.

"But she needs to be killed as soon as the kits are born." Tigerstar purred.

"No! I will not allow it." Brambleclaw rose to his paws, heading straight to Tigerstar. Crowstar stopped and blocked him.

"They are just kits. We have plenty of true Clan kits already in the

camp." Tigerstar's breath made mist float in the air. "I say we question her then kill her. We shouldn't give her help from our medicine cats, give her our herbs, and prey from our fresh kill pile!" He roared.

"I agree." Breezepelt added coldly.

Leafpool's torn gaze was horrified. She stood in front of the rogue awkwardly awaiting a final decision, but it seemed none of the cats could reach a decision.

Tawnypelt moved near her. She looked at Jessy as she spoke.

"My son was killed by this rogue. I will have the final say. We will not-" She gasped, falling to the ground suddenly.

"Tawnypelt!" Leafpool cried out. She followed the tortoiseshell cat to the ground where she had collapsed. She began to check her, then Shadowsight came to her aid. "You still need rest, Leafpool. Let me help." Leafpool nodded at him warmly. The two cats worked side by side, as the other cats around them watched, stunned.

Tawnypelt's eyes were squeezed shut painfully, as if something loud was bothering her. She couldn't seem to open them. Her ears were twitching occasionally.

"What hurts?" Leafpool asked her. Her gaze searched Tawnypelt's face.

"Everything," Tawnypelt groaned, unable to open her eyes. Her ears twitched again.

The other cats around them started to whisper with anxiety.

"Is she sick?"

"Is her shadow cat hurting her?"

"What's wrong with her?"

Murmurs filled the camp, and their volume became louder and louder.

***

Tawnypelt dug her claws into the ground as she tried to feel her way through the thick, heavy mud. When she opened her eyes, to her surprise, she found herself standing in a thick pine forest. Her paws felt hot. She tried to move, but before she could, she spotted a dark shadowy figure darting between the trees. It was blinking from tree to tree so fast that she could hardly keep up with it.

Something about it felt unfamiliar, off. Evil. It reminded her of a snake hidden in the dark, moving towards its prey.

That's not my shadow cat, Tawnypelt realized with a splash of horror. Suddenly, she wasn't sure what to do. She panicked as she watched the shadow move from the ground, to the branches of the tree, behind a bush, to the sky. It was empty and hollow, moving like a whirlwind.

Determination seeped into Tawnypelt. This was her chance, and she wouldn't allow timidity or fear ruin it. She began to chase after it, but it moved away from her. It always seemed just a paw out of reach. Every time she would lunge towards it, it would dart again, flickering like a dark flame.

Why isn't my shadow cat here? Unease curled into Tawnypelt's fur as she realized that without her shadow, there was no way she could catch this evil creature or kill it. But she knew she still had to try. Her movements began to tire and she began to slow. She didn't have the energy to keep up with the dark force.

From a few bushes away, as if she had summoned it, her shadow cat lunged out, hissing loudly. Tawnypelt stopped running as she watched the two shadows roll down a small hill in a bundle of whirling shadowy paws. Their snarls hurt her ears.

It was at that moment, seeing the two cats together, Tawnypelt knew which shadow was hers, but she didn't know how or why.

Finally, Tawnypelt's shadow cat pinned down the other. It's voice was triumphant, echoing throughout the forest in a booming tone. "Leave. You don't belong here."

"Fine!" The other hissed back. A big, dark whirly wind seem to spin around it. "But I'm coming back soon." It turned around to stare at Tawnypelt, making her jump backwards in surprise. It's hollow, soulless black eyes had turned an eerie amber, one that reminded Tawnypelt of a cat, although she couldn't quite put her paw on who. It made her shiver.

Unable to move, she watched the shadow slowly drift apart. The curls of its wind thinned out around its cat figure, and it seemed to melt and evaporate, slowly slipping away. It fluttered higher into the breeze until Tawnypelt couldn't see it anymore.

"Where am I? What is happening?" Tawnypelt shouted to the empty forest and her shadow that remained, but her world began to melt away, the images of what she had seen started to fade, until Tawnypelt found herself sitting up in the medicine den. Her mind was fuzzy. The familiar stuffy, pungent smell of the medicine den with its dim lighting surrounded her.

Shadowsight noticed her open her eyes immediately. He turned to look at her, concerned. "What happened? You just fell unconscious. Did you speak to your shadow cat?" Shadowsight looked up from where he was pawing through a neatly packed stack of herbs. He waited anxiously for her answer.

Leafpool sat next to her, pressing a cool moss ball against her pelt.

"I-I..." Tawnypelt blinked at him, a fog of confusion rolling across her gaze. "I know something happened. But I can't remember." She whispered. She felt a shake rumble through her body then blackness overwhelmed her.

Chapter 19

"This is my favorite spot to come to when I want to think."

Hawkwing was looking out among an icy field surrounded by withered reeds.

"It's much more beautiful when there's no snow." He added.

"It's certainly peaceful. Sometimes we need a break from the commotion of all the cats in the camp." Squirrelstar sighed.

"That's for sure!" Hawkwing's eyes laughed, amused. He paused, a more serious expression in his eyes.

"Do you feel like you need a break from your Clan sometimes?"

Squirrelstar hesitated, not sure of what to say. "I guess it's not because of my Clan. It's just that we all need time alone sometimes."

"I prefer to always share my quiet time with someone special." Hawkwing blinked as he looked at Squirrelstar. Squirrelstar purred, unsure of what to say.

They did not notice that in the bushes behind them, another cat was nearby. Leafpool was trying to dust off snow from herbs in the hopes that she could find some survived the cold. Each time she thought she found something useful, she would find it was destroyed. Her tail drooped as she sat and stared at the array of frozen herbs. Most of them were deformed and torn.

I can't go back to the camp like this, she sighed to herself. She had hoped there would be some dock leaves like Puddleshine had found, but she had no such luck.

At least I can try to look under the bushes here. Maybe something can be salvaged from the cold.

Leafpool padded, sniffing the bushes intently and moving the leaves gently. She paused when she heard voices.

I didn't know any cats were nearby. Her ears pricked.

Puzzled, she stopped to listen. She could hear her sister's voice talking animatedly. Curious, she pushed her head further through the bush, so she could peer through the other side.

Oh StarClan! Leafpool gasped.

In front of her, Squirrelstar and Hawkwing were sitting unusually close to each other. Their tails were almost entwined. Squirrelstar was telling him stories about her times as an apprentice, when gently, Hawkwing entwined his tail with hers again. Their eyes met in unison with laughter.

Leafpool froze. As a thousand memories flashed through her mind, she was unable to move. First she saw Crowstar reaching to save her when she was going to fall. Then she saw him padding through the moor with her, the wind dancing in their pelts happily. Flashes of images moved quickly, one upon another, until the night they were together in the cave before they had parted, their last night together. That memory slowly faded away, and she saw Crowstar fighting for her Clan when the badgers attacked. His dark head was bending near hers as she wailed for Cinderpelt in an attempt to console her, but to no avail. She remembered her kits, how she had felt when she had carried them far away in the snow. Lonely, scared, heavy. The chill of the leafbare when they were born. Their small paws flailing towards her for milk.

Suddenly, an agonizing worry overwhelmed Leafpool, and it shook every hair on her pelt.

I don't want that for my sister. No, not Squirrelstar. She deserves better.

Her head jolted up in alarm, and she immediately jumped out of the bushes quickly. Her movement was so fast she nearly bumped into Crowstar.

Crowstar looked into her eyes hesitantly.

"I heard from some cats that you were looking for herbs. I wanted to tell you I came here yesterday for prey, and I found it empty. I don't think you will have any luck here." He paused, continuing when Leafpool didn't respond. "Also, Kestrelflight was wondering if you could come back to camp soon because Jessy is acting strange."

Leafpool was caught off-guard, and she felt herself suddenly aware that Crowstar was very close to Squirrelstar and Hawkwing. She had a hard time focusing on Jessy when she knew her sister was so near, in danger of being seen with Hawkwing. The last thing she wanted was for Crowstar to know about her sister. Her mind was caught up in a flurry of thoughts, and she tried hard to stay calm in front of the WindClan leader.

"Thank you, Crowstar." Her voice was solemn when she finally replied.

Why does she always sound like that when she says my name? Crowstar's tail felt limp with sadness at the sound of her voice.

"Let's go back to camp then. I don't want to keep Kestrelflight waiting."

As they turned to go back to camp, the sound of voices crept through the bushes behind them.

"Is- Is someone with you?" Crowstar stared in the direction of the bushes. A hint of jealousy sparked in his eyes.

Maybe that's why she is acting strange. He began to boil inwardly at the thought and couldn't help a slight bristle.

"I-" Before Leafpool could finish, Crowstar ducked into the bush where Leafpool had been. Leafpool so desperately wanted to drag him by the tail to protect her sister, but she knew that would only look suspicious. She followed him into the bush reluctantly with a feeling of dread inside of her. Sighing heavily, she could only watch on as Crowstar stared at the two cats.

Hawkwing and Squirrelstar were talking even louder, completely forgetting all the Clans, as if they were in their own world. Their

pelts were tightly brushing against each other as they chattered about their pasts. Carefree. When their tails entwined again, Leafpool felt a gnawing hole in the pit of her stomach. She glanced over at Crowstar anxiously to gage his reaction.

To her surprise, Crowstar's eyes were light, full of amusement. He turned to look over at Leafpool. His blue eyes were glowing against the blackness of his pelt. She couldn't stand the silence, still fearing too much for her sister, and she felt panic welling up inside of her.

Leafpool shook her head, unsure of what to say, but knowing she needed to say something.

"Please Crowstar-"

The black tom interrupted her quickly. "Why don't we head back to camp?" He nudged his head back to the direction of the camp.

Leafpool hesitated, surprised by his reaction. *Perhaps this is for the best for now,* she thought to herself. Leafpool wanted to look at her sister again, but she didn't dare do it while Crowstar was with her.

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As they entered the camp, several cats glanced at Leafpool and Crowstar suspiciously. Leafpool sighed in frustration inwardly.

If I had brought back something, they wouldn't be so suspicious!

Thornclaw glared at her as he bit into a huge bite of vole. His mouth was bulging with food as he chewed, never letting his eyes move from Leafpool. Yellowfang padded into her view, a piece of prey in her mouth as she glared at the two cats.

"What took you so long?" She asked demandingly. The mouse tail was dangling from her mouth as she spoke.

"I was searching for herbs. I couldn't find any. Crowstar came to tell me that Kestrelflight needs me. What is wrong with Jessy?"

Yellowfang glanced over at the medicine den.

"We don't know." She said in a soft voice. "If you are done with Crowstar, I can take you to her." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the tom angrily.

"Yes, I am leaving now." Crowstar nodded his head and padded away. His head was sunk in disappointment.

Leafpool watched him as he went over to the fresh kill pile in a lonely, heartbroken way. *Poor Crowstar*, she thought to herself.

Yellowfang abruptly moved to stand in front of her view of Crowstar.

"Can we go back to the medicine den now, or are you going to sit here and moon-"

"Please don't say that, Yellowfang. Despite what you think, I am only like this with Crowstar because I pity him. That is all. You know where my loyalty lies now."

Yellowfang rolled her eyes as she padded to the medicine den with Leafpool. They had just set their paws to enter when they heard a short breath gasping behind them.

"Please, Yellowfang! Leafpool!" Tigerstar was holding his paw up. He whispered, looking around at the other cats to make sure they couldn't hear him. "Please, I can hardly walk. Can you check my paw?"

Yellowfang narrowed her eyes at the warrior. "Give us a moment. I will be right back."

When Leafpool and Yellowfang entered the medicine den, Jessy was sitting upright in her nest feasting heartily on a squirrel. Her eyes were very bright as she gulped down enormous bites quickly.

"I don't see anything wrong with her." Leafpool looked at Yellowfang confused.

Kestrelflight stepped forward from the herb pile.

"She collapsed in the camp. Brambleclaw brought her in here, and

she was not awake. I checked her heart. It was fine. I checked her breathing, and it was normal too. I'm not quite sure what happened, but now she is normal." Kestrelflight's belly grazed the ground in a mound of fluff as he moved towards the rogue to listen to her stomach.

"The kits are alright too." He added with satisfaction.

As he kneeled closer putting his paw against Jessy's stomach, Jessy suddenly shot up violently, and began heaving. Her eyes were wide. Kestrelflight stepped back, alarmed, as they watched Jessy gag over and over until she finally vomited all over her nest.

Leafpool rushed to her side and so did Yellowfang. Jessy's head fell back into her soiled nest, a look of relief on her face. Leafpool looked cautiously at the squirrel, poking it with her paws.

"It looks normal." Leafpool said in a puzzled tone.

Yellowfang nodded, grabbing a moss ball for Jessy to drink.

Heavy paws from behind interrupted them. Both she-cats turned to see Tigerstar, still limping in pain. He had stormed into the medicine den with an exasperated look on his face.

"You said you would come back. What is taking so long?!"

"As you can see," Yellowfang started, "I am trying to give Jessy water because she just vomited, and she is weak. I need to make sure she won't vomit again, then I will come check your paw."

"What about you, Leafpool, just look at it." He started to lift his paw towards Leafpool, but Leafpool turned to him apologetically.

"I'm sorry Tigerstar. I have to find juniper berries for Jessy."

"Jessy!" He almost yowled incredulously. He looked over at the rogue who was barely awake. He inhaled sharply, trying to control his temper.

"Alright then, Kestrelflight." He padded over to the the WindClan medicine cat. "My paw needs to be checked I don't know-"

"Not now, Tigerstar! I need to try to find some moss to replace Jessy's soiled bedding." He abruptly left the medicine den without another word.

"Where's Shadowsight?" Tigerstar's voice was growing more and more impatient.

"I saw him leave earlier. He went in the direction of the lake to try to find some herbs on the other side of the camp for Jessy. He hasn't returned yet, but if you want-"

Tigerstar snorted and turned his back on Leafpool as she was speaking. While he left the medicine den, he was growling under his breath.

"Jessy is not taking any water." Yellowfang commented. "She refuses it."

"Perhaps we should let her rest." Leafpool suggested.

"She has collapsed and vomited. I dont' think these are good signs, especially after our last struggle with green cough." Yellowfang's tone was very serious as she spoke, almost in a whisper. "I am afraid of what she has. What if other cats can get it?"

Leafpool looked down upon the snoozing Jessy. "We will have to keep other cats away from her for now. But what about Firestar?" She glanced over at her father who was sleeping. Since the injury to his back, he had not yet fully recovered. He spent most of the day sleeping, and it made Leafpool worry. She looked upon her father tenderly. "I don't want him to get sick from Jessy."

Yellowfang looked over at Firestar. "We can wait and see if she becomes ill again, then move him tomorrow morning if she is still ill. Maybe it is a sickness that has passed."

Leafpool nodded her head in agreement. It was getting dark in the medicine den, and the moon's glow was weak. Both cats retired to their nests, hoping no one would interrupt their sleep.

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Firestar's eyes cracked open. A dim light from the moon was shining on the medicine den's ceiling. He could hear the medicine cats' deep breathing near him and soft murmurs in their sleep. On the other side of his nest, he could see a she-cat's very large, dark form. Her breath was weak and hardly existent.

Shadows were draped all over the walls, and no cat seemed to be awake. But Firestar sat up with boredom. He felt a bit achy, but he couldn't sleep. Hunger was creating a giant, burning hole in his stomach. He wanted to check the fresh kill pile outside without any cat noticing, but at the same time, he knew he wasn't suppose to move with his injury. Glancing over at Leafpool, he hesitated, not wanting to wake her peaceful, curled-up form.

He tried to move from his nest, but the pain in his back was like a sharp tooth digging down into his flesh. Frustrated, he fell back down with a plop.

I am so tired of the smell of herbs. What I wouldn't give to smell prey again, he inhaled the scent of the herbs, and they hurt his nose. He twitched his ears in disgust.

Lifting his head, Firestar smelled something else. A weaker smell, but it was getting stronger. It was another cat. Firestar looked around the darkness of the medicine den, trying to focus his eyes. He saw something moving, gliding in the shadows. Alarmed, he sat up. But the cat who was entering didn't seem to notice or care. As his eyes followed the cat in the shadows with a feeling of dread, he watched the cat inch closer to the nest where the she-cat was sleeping nearby.

The cat stopped just as it reached the nest. Perplexed, Firestar watched, unsure of the cat's intentions. It suddenly pawed the she-cat, turning her face downward and pushing it into the ground. The cat had moved, putting all of its weight on the she-cat and pouncing lightly on her body, forcing her face further and further into the ground. The she-cat began to let out a muffled cry, but it was so low, none of the medicine cats could hear it.

"Stop!" Firestar cried out as he jumped out of his nest without thinking. He felt the warmth of his wound ripping open and fresh

blood trickling out of it.

Leafpool and Yellowfang jumped abruptly in their nests, stunned to find a bleeding Firestar pulling back the cat on top of Jessy. Drops of Firestar's blood had splattered a trail on the den floor.

"What is going on here?" Yellowfang demanded as she stomped her way over to Firestar. "Get back to your nest now!" she yowled. "And you-" She pulled the cat by the scruff hard, pushing it back against the medicine wall with a thud. The amber eyes of the cat met her gaze.

"Tigerstar!" Leafpool was furious and outraged. "How dare you sneak in her at night and try to hurt a cat! This is a place of healing, not a place of war!" Her fur bristled as she spoke.

But Tigerstar looked quite pleased with himself. "Let me finish what I came here to do."

Brambleclaw rushed into the medicine den, his amber eyes wide. "What is all this noise in here? What is going on here?!"

He gazed at his mate who was sprawled across her nest, her eyes wide with shock as she panted.

"Tigerstar tried to kill Jessy." Yellowfang replied as Leafpool nudged Firestar back to his nest. The ginger tom was moaning in pain. His wound had re-opened, and he was heavier than before. Leafpool quickly wrapped cobwebs over it, but the red stain was still soaking through the threads.

"He did what?!" Brambleclaw roared, seeming to grow twice his size in his fury. Not waiting for an answer, the dark tabby launched himself at Tigerstar with claws unsheathed.

"Brambleclaw, stop!" Jayfeather yowled, but neither cat seemed to hear her. "Both of you mouse-brains shouldn't be fighting in here!"

As they rolled across the medicine den as a massive, dark ball, the two toms hissed and clawed each other. Their bodies thudded against the medicine den, crashing into its sides violently. Each crash seemed to hit harder with a louder smash. But the two toms

didn't seem to notice as they continued to roll over the other in turns, snarling viciously with unsheathed claws.

The walls of the medicine den shook slightly.

Leafpool tried to tear apart the two toms, but she didn't have the strength in her leg to fight against their forces. Yellowfang and Jayfeather pulled at their scruffs, but the toms pushed against them defiantly, clawing at each other mid-air.

The den seemed to rumble. Debris that at first sprinkled to the ground now began to pour down harder. Soon, chunks of the medicine fell into larger pieces, and the cats looked up in alarm.

But it was too late. The entrance collapsed as a pile of mud and rock slid down, cutting the light of the moon from outside. The den went pitch black.

Jayfeather broke the black silence. "Now look what you've done! In all my years as a medicine cat, I've never seen such mouse-brained behavior from any other cats!" Jayfeather exploded at Tigerstar and Brambleclaw, but neither tom cared. They were still glaring at each other. Only the darkness of the den had stopped them from fighting.

As they began to notice their surroundings, they forgot about each other and began to scan the den worriedly.

"What do you have to say for yourselves?" Yellowfang snarled.

Tigerstar glared back at her. "This is all Jessy's fault. My paw is still aching. I spent my whole day trying to find a medicine cat who could help me, and every time I tried to get my paw checked, the medicine cats would tell me they are busy because of Jessy! She is in here taking the time of all the medicine cats, all the herbs of the medicine cats, and when a Clan leader needs something, you are all busy because of her. You should all let me kill her. She is just making more problems for us. I told you this is what she would do if she lived, and I was right."

Goosefeather lifted his head sleepily. "What's going on?"

All the cats looked over at his fluffy, circular shape as he yawned.

"Go back to sleep!" Tigerstar snapped, his tail lashing. Goosefeather shrugged indifferently. As he murmured in his slumber about warm, plump mice, his head fell deeper into his nest.

"We should be focusing on leaving, not trying to kill Jessy!" Leafpool's harsh voice silenced Tigerstar. "The only two cats at fault are you two silly toms. You have as much control as a pair of kits."

Tigerstar grunted begrudgingly, but turned his gaze to the blocked medicine den. His face was set in stubborn stone.

Muffled meows were coming from outside the den, and the scratching of claws echoed outside. Several voices could be heard.

"Tigerstar! Can you hear me?! Are you alright?!" Dovewing's wail rose above the rest, and Tigerstar, forgetting everything else, pressed his ear against the rocks and mud. A look of despair suddenly rushed into his bright eyes.

"Dovewing! I'm coming! Don't worry!" Tigerstar turned to the rest of the cats. "We need to focus on leaving. Has this happened before to a medicine den entrance? Are there any twigs in here we can use to dig out the mud?"

Yellowfang snorted. "No, of course this has never happened to us before because our dens are suppose to be places of healing, not places of war."

"No cats have dared to be so mouse-brained, as I said before!" Jayfeather snapped. His icy eyes pierced in the darkness.

"How are we going to get out?" Willowshine's wide, soft eyes stared ahead at the entrance of the den.

No cat answered.

Chapter 20

A crack of sunlight slipped through the medicine den. Paws broke through the mud, scooping it out eagerly and removing small pebbles as well.

Jayfeather looked at Tigerstar scornfully. "If you ever do this again to the medicine den, I will line all the nests in here with your pelt."

Tigerstar rolled his eyes. "Brambleclaw is at fault with his rogue mate."

Leafpool ignored them, too distracted by the black paw bursting through the opening. Her heart lifted as she realized Crowstar was at the lead trying to clear the entrance of the medicine den.

Jessy sniffed haughtily, breaking the silence. While the other cats were preoccupied by the rescue, Jessy was slumped glumly on the floor with a resentful look in her eyes.

"Those warriors need to work faster. The air is so stuffy in here I can hardly breathe!" She looked down at her growing belly with a glance of concern, but it was quite obvious she was still angry about the way she was treated by the Clans.

Tigerstar glared coldly at her. "Would you prefer me to stop your breathing altogether?"

Jessy scowled back at him.

Slowly, the sounds of the meows outside of the den grew louder. Yowls of happiness and triumph could be heard through the small sunlit cracks. Leafpool sprung to her paws as she heard Squirrelstar calling her name.

"Leafpool!" Squirrelstar's voice was laced with fear and exhaustion. "Are you okay?"

Leafpool tried to see her sister through the cracks, but they were too small. "I'm alright." Leafpool's mind became completely absorbed in the sound of her sister's voice. There was something off about it, and it disturbed her to the point where she was distracted completely by it. She tried to peek at her anxiously and jump higher but without success. Her sister was still not visible, but Leafpool knew there was something wrong.

"Speak for yourself, Leafpool. ***I'm*** not alright." Jessy meowed loudly and dramatically, but everyone decidedly didn't hear her.

Squirrelstar's voice cracked as she spoke. "I thought- I thought after what happened with the sisters-"

"I'm okay." Leafpool repeated, calmly. Her voice was growing smaller over the sound of the cats outside.

"What about Alderheart?" Squirrelstar asked.

"He's checking on Firestar's wound."

There was a loud heave then a boulder tumbled loosely down, rolling out of the way and sending dust, pebbles, and drops of mud flying into the air. The dust permeated the air as the cats stepped back on both sides.

"My nest!" Goosefeather cried out in anguish.

The hole was now large enough for a cat to squeeze through. Squirrelstar's green eyes peeped through to observe the inside of the den, quickly scanning for her kin.

"I can't jump through that!" Jessy wailed. "Not with the kits!"

"We all know!" Yellowfang snapped, her dark grey pelt bristled as she turned to glare at Jessy.

Every cat in the medicine den had lost their patience with Jessy except Brambleclaw. Although they wanted to take care of her for the sake of the kits, her whining and high maintenance was exhausting for all of them.

"The hole has to be enlarged for Jessy. It's not acceptable for any cat to pass through if Jessy can't. She has more needs than any of us right now." Brambleclaw announced.

"Well, I don't mind going without her." Tigerstar shrugged. He began to move towards the opening so he could leave first.

All the cats stared at him bitterly as he padded forward first.

"Don't move!" Shadowsight's voice cried out in warning.

There was just barely enough time for him to warn his father.

At the opening of the medicine den, wisps of shadows were coming from the ground, curling up around the entrance like a vine. The shadow was growing larger and larger as it expanded into the air, encroaching upon the miniscule cats below it. It cackled and hissed with pleasure as it felt the fear in their eyes. The sky around them had darkened, and most of the cats were backing away, trembling.

A few were more obstinate and glaring, but hesitated with uncertainty. They knew the last time they were attacked, cats died when they were touched by it.

From behind, a cat yowled, "It's the shadow cat!"

"Hide the kits!" One of the elder's cried out.

"***No one will leave this medicine den.***" It hissed in a long, slurring voice. Its gaze raked the entrance as it looked at it from top to bottom. Long tendrils of darkness curled from it while its tail lashed, stretching towards the cats with a thirst for kill.

The tendrils reached out like a mist of death, brushing the pelts of Leaftail, Weaselfur, and the ghostly spirit of Onestar. All three of the cats immediately faded away. Even their dead bodies had disappeared.

"Onestar!" Heathertail sobbed, as she tried to move towards where her father once was, only to stop when she realized that he was completely gone. She glared at the shadow cat wanting revenge, but Breezepelt held her back before she could lunge forward. His tail

gently brushed her back.

"Don't do anything rushed." He whispered, trying to calm Heathertail. He gazed up at the enlarged dark cat, then looked away with bitterness. Scanning nearby him, he found Tawnypelt standing right behind him. His amber eyes were full of anger as he spoke.

"Why aren't you doing something? Get rid of it now!" Breezepelt was yowling, his frustration growing with the loudness of his voice. He glared accusingly at Tawnypelt. The cats around her nodded in agreement silently. They stared, anticipating for any sign from the ShadowClan she-cat, but nothing happened.

Tawnypelt slightly shivered then fluffed out her pelt. She glanced nervously at the cats waiting for her to do something to make the shadow disappear.

"I don't know how!" She paused in anguish. "I'm sorry. If I could make it come out, I would."

"Get your shadow cat out now!" Breezepelt snarled at her demandingly, ignoring her helplessness.

Tawnypelt tensed and closed her eyes for a few seconds, but then opened them again and blinked helplessly at everyone watching her. "I'm trying- I can't. I don't know why it isn't coming."

In front of the medicine den, the shadow cat purred, seeming to hear Tawnypelt's desperation. It reared onto its hind legs, towering up to twice its size. Its tendrils were spreading, moving faster towards the helpless group of cats, darkening the camp and creating a stirring of wind.

But before it could move further, a loose boulder wobbled from above the medicine den, rolled over the edge, and landed straight on the shadow cat. Its muffled shriek stung the air like a burst of terror, then it vanished- faded, as if it had never been there before.

"What happened?" Squirrelstar moved closer with the other Clan leaders towards the entrance. They looked above at the roof of the den.

An embarrassed looking Rootspring poked his fluffy head from behind a clump of bushes. "I-."

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he sounded more confident. Tree cocked his head with a bewildered expression. Rootspring's bright blue eyes pierced the cats with his determination and stoicism.

"I couldn't let it kill more cats. I thought maybe if I could find something that was strong, and it came at it suddenly, it would be scared."

The cats looked at Rootspring, their expressions tender and admiring.

Their voices slowly started to move like a wave. "Did he kill the shadow cat?"

"He is the bravest cat I have ever seen." Another one meowed.

"But how can we be sure it's dead?"

"He is a Light In The Mist." One cat murmured.

All the furry heads in the clearing stared at Rootspring, some expressions of disbelief, others twinkled with hope.

Rootspring's ears twitched nervously. "I don't know if I killed it." He seemed slightly embarrassed about getting so much attention. "I'm not sure. But I just did what I felt was right at the time. That's all."

"Could the shadow cat be so easily defeated?" Jayfeather's puzzled, blank expression spoke from a shadow in the medicine den entrance. "I suppose only time will tell."

As he spoke, Reedstar lifted his tail for silence. He moved to the center of the group, trying to collect the cats and bring them back to reality.

"In any case, we all need prey after such a shock. I propose we have a hunting patrol go out now. The fresh kill pile is low. I will make sure many cats leave together and stay together for their own

safety. Are there any volunteers who will hunt now? We should send two patrols."

"I'll go." Squirrelstar offered. Her voice was fatigued and lost in thought.

Leafpool eyed her sister from the den. The burning sensation she had once felt for her sister came back to her again. *There is something off about her. It's not just my imagination.* She stared at her sister intensely, but Squirrelstar didn't notice.

"I will go too." Hootwhisker padded up to Squirrelstar's side.

Dawnpelt flicked her tail. "I'll come too."

Dovewing nodded and took a paw-step forward.

"I'd like to come too." Leafpool meowed suddenly, creating an awkward silence. She felt prickly and hot as she spoke with every cats' eyes on her.

"I want to look for any herbs since all our stock is low, and leaf-bare will be coming to an end soon."

Tigerstar blinked, then shrugged as he turned back to the crowd. Squirrelstar's eyes remained locked on her sister. Leafpool could feel her gaze narrow with suspicion, but she tried to brush it. blinking at her warmly in an attempt to distract her.

She seems to have a lot on her mind. I don't want to make her more worried.

Reedstar continued, "Since the first patrol is decided, another patrol can go with Hawkwing, Icewing, Feathertail, and Silverstream."

The blinking obviously didn't work.

Leafpool resigned herself to trying to comfort her sister.

She always knows when I am lying. She knows me better than any cat. The sooner I can speak with her alone, the better.

As soon as the patrol left camp and split up to search for prey, Leafpool heard Squirrelstar following her from behind. She sensed something brewing in Squirrelstar, and she could feel her eagerness to talk to her.

"I can tell you're following me." Leafpool mewed aloud. She turned her head back to a bush behind her. Squirrelstar poked her ginger head out, sighing.

"I never could sneak up on you."

Her whiskers twitched as she padded out of the bush to meet up with her sister.

Leafpool flicked her tail, unable to stifle a purr. "I could hear you purring from the Moonpool." Her face was amused and soft. "You were never known for being quiet."

"And I could hear you talking about herbs all the way from the island." Squirrelstar replied with delight in her eyes.

"You fell asleep more than half the time!" Leafpool retorted, her mew light.

Squirrelstar purred. "I couldn't help it."

Then Squirrelstar's gaze focused, and she blinked at Leafpool.

"Why did you tell the cats you wanted to collect herbs? I knew you were lying. Is there something wrong?"

"I'm worried about you." Leafpool explained. "Squirrelstar, I have to be honest with you. I am only saying this because I care about you. I know that you-" As she glanced around them, she paused, lowering her voice. "I saw you with Hawkwing. And ever since I saw you with him, you seem different somehow. I can't quite put a paw on it."

Squirrelstar frowned. "I don't really see what your point is."

Leafpool sighed heavily. "I have been there before Squirrelstar. I don't want you to have the pain and the burden that I carried. I

think it would be better if you kept your distance from Hawkwing. I know it has been hard for you, watching Brambleclaw take another mate in front of all the cats. But breaking the code never helps. It just complicates everything. Please don't be upset with me. I just don't want you to get hurt the way I did."

Squirrelstar's eyes couldn't meet her sister's when she spoke again.

"I can't Leafpool. I can't do what you did. I refuse to live in shame for loving a cat from another Clan. I don't want to have any regrets."

Leafpool tilted her head. "I know you Squirrelstar. I can't make you do anything you don't want. But please be careful. This shadow cat has made everyone edgy. I fear for you." She sighed, her eyes full of sorrow. "I feel you are different. There is something wrong with you. Ever since I saw you and Hawkwing together, you haven't been yourself. I don't even feel you are happy. Perhaps you don't feel it, but I see it in your eyes."

"I am happy with Hawkwing. Brambleclaw was never able to treat me the way he does. It's just that I haven't been feeling well lately."

Leafpool's ears pricked up in alarm. "If you weren't feeling well, why didn't you come to me?"

"I felt that you were overwhelmed with Firestar. I didn't want to upset you more than you were already. You were also injured, and sometimes you would limp after the fox attack. You kept taking care of the other cats and not yourself. I didn't need to complicate the situation even more."

"That's nonsense, Squirrelstar. I am a medicine cat. I must take care of everyone, not just you. What is bothering you? What do you feel?" Leafpool's eyes were probing as she looked over Squirrelstar.

"I feel dizzy sometimes and very tired." Squirrelstar shrugged, as she plopped down to the ground. "Nothing too serious."

Leafpool stopped, frozen. Her amber eyes were fixated on Squirrelstar's body.

"What is it, Leafpool? What's wrong?"

Leafpool blinked. "I- "

She paused, moving closer to examine Squirrelstar's body. Her eyes were alarmed. Stopping suddenly, she stared ahead at the marshes in front of her. Her eyes were thoughtful, distant, and solemn. She took a deep, heavy breath before she spoke.

"I think you are with kits."

Squirrelstar could tell from Leafpool's appearance that she was upset. Her heart was hammering so loud as if it were her own, and she was trying to remain calm, but her paws trembled.

"You what?!" Squirrelstar gaped at Leafpool. "What did you just say?"

"I think you're expecting kits." Leafpool repeated, as a sinking feeling settled in her stomach.

And I know who the father is.

"Are you sure?" Squirrelstar asked, her eyes wide.

Leafpool nodded.

Oh Squirrelstar, what have you done?

She waited to gauge her sister's reaction in fear of what it might be. Her eyes were full of pity.

Happiness sparkled in Squirrelstar's eyes, then her gaze darkened temporarily. Leafpool could see a sliver of fear there.

She knows she is breaking the code.

Without thinking, Leafpool rushed to her side, getting closer to her. In a low voice, she spoke calmly.

"You have to tell the Clans they're Brambleclaw's kits." Leafpool meowed. "That is the only way they will be accepted. It will be hard

enough for you to be accepted as a Clan leader carrying kits."

Squirrelstar shook her head, determination lighting up her gaze.

"I am sorry, Leafpool. That was what you felt was best for you- to hide the truth from your kits and the cats around you. My situation is different. I can't do it. I don't want to have to keep these kits a secret. I don't want to live another lie like I did before. I want to be able to love freely. I will do what is right."

She narrowed her eyes towards the camp as she spoke.

"You're a Clan leader, and Hawkwing is a deputy." Leafpool frowned. "Even with the new warrior code, neither of you could leave your Clans. How would it ever work out? The kits will be without a father when the Clans go back-"

Squirrelstar sighed painfully, interrupting her sister. "I know, but I don't want to lie. I can't. I can't do it to my kits. You know the pain it caused Hollyleaf, Lionblaze, and Jayfeather."

Leafpool shuddered and exhaled slowly. "I can see your mind is made up already, and I know how stubborn you are." Her eyes gleamed with warmth suddenly. "I have to advise you though, you know that. In the end though whatever you do is your decision, not mine, Squirrelstar. I will support you and be with you no matter what you decide."

The sounds of the rest of the patrol returning distracted the two she-cats, as Dawnpelt, Hootwhisker, and Dovewing padded over to them suddenly.

"You both sure did find lots of prey and herbs." Hootwhisker snorted.

Dovewing shrugged and flicked her tail. "We've caught enough now, and if we stay out any longer, we might get sick from the cold. Let's go back."

The cats looked inquisitively at Squirrelstar and Leafpool, but said nothing else as they padded back.

They divided the prey in silence. Squirrelstar padded at the rear of the patrol, her gaze uncertain.

I hope I'm making the right decision.

A touch of sadness clung to her pelt.

The cats were eating outside in the last few rays of the sun, which did not provide that much warmth. But it allowed the kits to wobble around and stretch in front of the nursery, and it gave the elders a chance to have a change of scenery.

Squirrelstar was surveying the large pool of cats, some of them sitting together, some of them alone, feasting, and distributing the prey.

"I have something to announce." Squirrelstar stood at the head of the crowd. At first no cat seemed to notice her except the nearby ones. She spoke again louder.

"I have something to announce as leader of ThunderClan."

From afar, Leafpool blinked reassuringly.

"As leader of ThunderClan, I must tell you any information that might affect my Clan. That will affect all of you." She paused. Her gaze wandered among the eyes staring at her.

"I am expecting kits."

Before she could continue, cats yowled out with enthusiasm and joy before she could finish. Leafstar, who was standing near to her, narrowed her eyes, observing her figure.

She nodded curtly. "Brambleclaw will be pleased."

Squirrelstar scuffed the ground nervously with her paws. By now many cats were meowing with excitement, and many of them had a look of approval in their eyes. Ivypool's eyes were shining.

But Squirrelstar knew she couldn't keep that moment forever. *I can't live with the lie*, she whispered to herself silently.

Closing her eyes, she spoke again. "They're not Brambleclaw's kits."

Silence broke the entire camp.

Tigerstar's interest was immediately piqued. "Oh?" He seemed to purr with pleasure.

Squirrelstar opened her eyes again. All the cats by now had stopped speaking. Many of them looked at her with suspicious glances.

"Then who's kits are they?" Reedstar interrupted with a raised brow.

Crowstar remained silent, his icy blue eyes boring in Squirrelstar, his feelings locked behind them.

Leafpool's gaze flickered between Squirrelstar and Crowstar, as if she knew what her sister would say, but hoped she wouldn't continue.

She has no idea how many problems this will cause, even if it is the right thing to do. Leafpool sighed as she waited for her to finish, a pained look in her eyes.

"They are Hawkwing's kits."

An uproar rose from the crowd, and Squirrelstar flattened her ears slightly. Suddenly, hesitation washed over her. She couldn't help wondering if this was the right thing for her to do for her, for Hawkwing, and her Clan.

"Does Hawkwing know?" Leafstar demanded, her amber gaze blazing at Squirrelstar. She looked furious.

Squirrelstar felt a deep remorse suddenly realizing that this would affect Hawkwing too. *Maybe I should have spoken to him first.*

"No, he doesn't know." Squirrelstar replied, suddenly feeling drained by the situation.

The SkyClan deputy and the rest of his patrol still hadn't returned. By now, Squirrelstar knew he would receive a frosty welcome when he returned. *He doesn't deserve that,* she ached silently.

"This will cause a problem for ThunderClan. It's one thing to break the code, but it's another when you are a leader. How can an expecting queen be a leader?" Tigerstar mused loudly, as he followed the eyes of the cats. His voice was persuasive and powerful as he paused.

"How will she be able to do her duties when she is ill or in the nursery?"

Silence fell among the camp.

"More importantly, Squirrelstar has broken the warrior code. This is something that should not be accepted by any cat." Thornclaw's dark glare met Squirrelstar's eyes.

"As I was saying, due to the circumstances now put in front of Squirrelstar, she cannot lead a Clan at a time like this. A leader needs to be completely devoted to the Clan's safety now. Can Squirrelstar put all her devotion into her Clan when she is occupied with having kits?" Tigerstar was quite satisfied with the silence from the cats around him.

Squirrelstar glared fiercely at him. "What are you trying to say about me?"

"This is not about being with kits. I led SkyClan and had kits." Leafstar narrowed her gaze at Tigerstar. "It is possible for Squirrelstar to do the same, but she knows this is not the time to break the code. Not at a time like this."

"I didn't choose the time." Squirrelstar mumbled. "It chose me." She looked at Leafstar with an uncertain expression, but the SkyClan leader wouldn't look at her.

Tigerstar continued, "When you led SkyClan, there was no shadow cat. The StarClan cats were where they were suppose to be. But now, everything is chaos. Nothing is right. That's why I'm

generously offering to help ThunderClan " Tigerstar meowed smoothly with victory.

"Oh no." Jayfeather rolled his eyes.

"How?" Squirrelstar raised one eyebrow warily.

"Ivypool doesn't have enough experience to be a leader. At a time like this, it is risky to put a new leader in place for any Clan."

As Ferncloud struggled to hold Ivypool down from attacking Tigerstar, he watched calmly with amusement. "And since there are only several leaders to take Squirrelstar's place during this perilous period, I have no choice but to do what is noble- to aid a Clan in need."

The whole of ThunderClan eyed Tigerstar suspiciously. Several low growls were heard.

"I will temporarily take over leading ThunderClan."

"Absolutely not." Squirrelstar interrupted. Her gaze had become sharp and dark.

"Over my dead body!" Thornclaw snarled while he ate.

"ShadowClan flea-bags will never take over ThunderClan!" Dustpelt was fixated on Tigerstar as his tail lashed.

An eruption broke out among the ShadowClan warriors and ThunderClan warriors. As they tried to attack one another, the commotion rose in the air, spilling over into chaos. RiverClan and SkyClan tried to hold them back, but without success. Paws began flailing, and hisses filled the air.

"Stop!" Yellowfang placed herself in between them. Gradually, the StarClan cats' starry pelts joined her in a glowing unison, filling the center of the camp.

"StarClan will not approve of a war between Clans now. We are all stronger united. Now is not the time to weaken each other." Yellowfang's furious, bright eyes silenced all the cats. They looked

down shamefully.

Leafstar continued to glare at Tigerstar in disgust. Her eyes never left him. She was fuming when she spoke. "ShadowClan has no right to take over ThunderClan, even if their leader has made some ***questionable*** mistakes. That will not help the situation."

"My kits are not a mista-" Squirrelstar stopped. Her eyes wide with horror.

Before she could finish, the rest of the cats in the clearing had followed her gaze to where Hawkwing and the rest of the patrol had padded into camp.

Their flanks were heaving and splattered with blood, and several of them were covered in wounds.

At the head of the patrol, Hawkwing fell to the ground with a heavy thud, unconscious and still.

Chapter 21

Leafpool and Kestrelflight rushed to Hawkwing's side, moving him gently to the medicine den. Racing straight behind them, Squirrelstar forgot all the glaring cats around her. Their nasty looks and sniffs of disgust were not heard by the dark ginger she-cat, even though some of them came from her own Clan.

The medicine den was stuffy, and the smell inside of it was nauseating to Squirrelstar. She pushed pass Jayfeather without so much a glance and moved next to Hawkwing's side stubbornly. Shadowsight and Alderheart were bringing in the other cats injured during the patrol.

"How could this happen?" Squirrelstar's voice was broken. With all the problems she had made by announcing her kits, she didn't imagine the situation could worse. But it had.

"What can we do for him?" She looked up at Leafpool pleadingly.

"I think he will be alright, Squirrelstar. He is just unconscious from shock."

"I agree, Squirrelstar. Hawkwing's wounds are not deep." Firestar's looked over at his daughter warmly as he sat up in his nest. Leafpool went to his side as he spoke, pushing a poppy seed in his mouth.

"I told you before, I don't need those anymore."

"And I told you before, you aren't going to get better if you don't rest." Leafpool padded away from him before he could comment again.

"Is it really necessary for you to be in here?" Jessy asked Squirrelstar in an innocent voice. "It's not like you are sick."

"Actually," Leafpool's voice was tense as she spoke, "She is with kits, and I want to check her before she leaves. I didn't get the chance to check her outside."

"She's what?!"

When Leafpool was done checking Squirrelstar, Squirrelstar noticed Jayfeather's eyes were glued to her. His cold stare was unnerving. She found she couldn't look away from him, locked in its depths of blue.

"Do you really think it is necessary for all of us to go through this kind of situation again?" Jayfeather's tone was dark. "If you don't see what is going on and the danger we are facing, you are blinder than I am!"

He turned his back and stomped out of the medicine den. Squirrelstar's eyes followed his grey shape with horror and shock.

"Don't mind Jayfeather." Leafpool padded to her nest bringing her water. "He has a strong opinion for all of us. But he doesn't mean it to-"

Squirrelstar stared up at her sister, interrupting her.

"Leafpool, I just want to sit here in quiet now please." Her eyes were big pools of sorrow, and Leafpool felt her heart crack as she looked into them.

"Squirrelstar, let me go fetch you some fresh kill."

"No."

"Squirrelstar, it's not good for your kits when you are upset like this. You don't want to lose them. Come outside with me to fetch some prey, then you can come back soon. I promise. Kestrelflight and Shadowsight will keep an eye on Hawkwing. Mothwing will also be returning soon with Willowshine."

Squirrelstar looked hesitatingly at Hawkwing's peaceful, sleeping face. Except for the thick layers of cobwebs wrapped around him, she could hardly tell he was injured.

"Alright."

Squirrelstar took one last look at Hawkwing as she padded out of the medicine den with Leafpool.

Crowstar was outside near the entrance. He looked up at the two sisters as they were passing him.

"How is Hawkwing?" He cleared his voice awkwardly, staring at Leafpool for an answer.

"He is stable, for now. All of the warriors sustained wounds like some animal attacked them."

"We should find out what happened as soon as they wake up. I'm guarding the front of the medicine den in case the shadow cat comes again."

"Thank you, Crowstar. Would you like Squirrelstar and I to bring you some fresh kill?"

Emberfoot snorted nearby where he was sharing a vole with Larkwing.

"Needing ThunderClan female cats to fetch him prey?"

As he nudged Larkwing to look over at the three cats, Emberfoot's voice had a hint of laughter in it.

"No, I'm fine." Crowstar turned away, giving the two she-cats his back abruptly.

As Leafpool approached the fresh kill pile with Squirrelstar, the hostility in the air was clear. Thornclaw blocked the fresh kill pile, moving slowly to allow Squirrelstar a passage, while never letting his burning eyes leave her. Squirrelstar shuddered as she felt the heat of his glare.

Behind her, Brambleclaw and Dustpelt were watching her every movement with scorn. She could hear them whispering to each other, but she couldn't make out their words.

Cloudtail was rather oblivious to everything as he stuffed his mouth with a mouse. "Are you going to take something, or can I take another piece?"

"Squirrelstar really needs to eat, Cloudtail." Leafpool's voice sounded a bit annoyed. She looked over at her sister. Her gaze was stuck to the ground.

"Would you like to go out of the camp?" Leafpool whispered in a low voice.

"No, I am alright. We can take the prey back to the medicine den."

"Already going to the medicine den, Squirrelstar?" Tigerstar had a pleased look on his face as he sat with Dovewing.

Squirrelstar looked back at Tigerstar, her gaze flat and furious, but the humor in his eyes didn't leave.

"Don't you think I should take over since you are already going to the medicine den? That's no place for a leader at a time like this."

"Indeed, Squirrelstar." Yellowfang replied from behind her.

Squirrelstar whirled around, shocked. "You too?" Her feelings were obviously hurt.

By now, many cats had gathered around them to listen.

"I have spoken with the rest of StarClan, and to be honest, we were divided at first. Then we finally found a compromise." Yellowfang looked over narrowly at Dovewing. "We have agreed that Tigerstar is the best option for now. We are not doubting you, Squirrelstar. This is only because of the situation now."

"I can't believe I am hearing this." Squirrelstar shook her head. "You mean to tell me that StarClan agreed to allow him to take over ThunderClan?" She pointed her tail disgustedly at Tigerstar's

direction.

Tigerstar rose, eager to meet the opportunity. "There is one condition." Yellowfang added.

Tigerstar whipped his tail eagerly. "I can handle any conditions."

Squirrelstar rolled her eyes.

Yellowfang's eyes glowed with humor. "In order to be fair for ThunderClan, Ivypool will remain your deputy. You will not have Cloverfoot as your deputy. Ivypool will see to it that you keep ThunderClan's interests at heart. You both must work together. It is a good opportunity to break the old feelings of resentment between the two of you."

Tigerstar froze. He slowly turned his head towards Ivypool. Her eyes were gleaming, and she was purring pleasantly. She padded up to Tigerstar getting right into his face. "I'm so glad I will be able to keep a watch on you." She was rather smug as she blinked at Squirrelstar.

With all her fatigue, Squirrelstar felt she would collapse. But she couldn't help but blink back at Ivypool.

"This is unacceptable!" Tigerstar roared.

"Are you defying the decision of StarClan?" Yellowfang tilted her head, her eyes meeting Tigerstar's with a hint of amusement in them.

Tigerstar was speechless as he turned his back on her with a huff and padded back to Dovewing. His mate whispered happily to him in the shade, obviously not minding the idea one bit.

Evening had come too early for Tawnypelt. Her last encounter from the shadow cat had left her fatigued and confused. Horrified. *How could I have let everyone down? What was wrong with my shadow?*

She stared up at the ceiling of the den hopelessly.

Is it gone? She trembled at the thought.

I was the Clans only hope, and now I am nothing, worse than nothing to them. I couldn't save them. Heathertail lost her father because I couldn't save him.

She shook her head bitterly, then placed it between her paws on the ground. She tried to calm herself, but her mind continued to race.

Dawnpelt padded up from behind her, nudging her gently. "Why don't you try to get some rest?"

"If I try to rest, all I can think of is the shadow. Then I can't sleep. Don't you see, Dawnpelt? I think it is gone. I am afraid the Clans will find out."

Dawnpelt's eyes widened, then she calmed herself quickly, smoothing out her pelt.

"I think you need to forget about it so you can rest."

"No!" Tawnypelt stood up, blood rushing through her body. "If I cannot get it to come to me, then I will try to reach it. I will go back to the ice lake where the shadow cat attacked Crowstar, and I will wait for it until it comes."

Dawnpelt shook her head. "That is mouse-brained, and you know it! You can't go alone to that lake. The ice could break again, and you can't go alone that is breaking the rules! You have to go with another cat."

"Then come with me." Tawnypelt looked at her daughter confidently.

"Why don't we wait till there is light?" Dawnpelt asked. "It's cold now. I don't want you to get sick." She was getting frustrated with trying to stop her mother.

"I am going." With that, Tawnypelt left the den defiantly.

Horrified, Dawnpelt rushed behind her.

"This is completely mouse-brained, bee-brained, and the most-"

"Be quiet! The other cats will notice us."

"I think they already have." Dawnpelt nudged her head towards Leafpool and Crowstar. The two were sitting together in front of the medicine den. They looked away awkwardly when they saw Tawnypelt and Dawnpelt notice them.

"They are too busy with each other." Tawnypelt rolled her eyes. "Let's go."

The leaves rustled around them in the bushes, and a few platters of rain drops fell on them. Tawnypelt liked the moistness of the rain. It made her feel alert, more clear, as she headed towards the lake.

"It's not far from here." She looked over at Dawnpelt as she spoke.

"I'm not worried about how far it is!" Dawnpelt's voice was exacerbated. "What if the ice cracks again?!"

"I have to be threatened in order for my shadow to appear."

"And what if neither shadows appear?" Dawnpelt stopped, her eyes hurt and afraid. No matter what she said to her mother, she wouldn't listen.

With persistence, Tawnypelt looked onwards. "We have to try for the Clans."

They broke through the bushes. The ice on the lake was dangerously thin, glittering under the dim light of the moon. Its sparkling flecks were mysterious and mesmerizing.

Tawnypelt began to pad to the ice without hesitation.

"Wait!" Dawnpelt cried.

Something smashed into Dawnpelt, knocking her over suddenly. It had looked grey, but Tawnypelt could not be sure.

"Are you alright?" Tawnypelt's eyes moved rapidly with fear.

Dawnpelt's eyes grew black as she raised her head mechanically, and an evil snicker erupted from her mouth. As the blackness spread from her, looming down upon Tawnypelt, she stepped back. Her eyes were wide as she looked upon the empty blackness of her daughter.

Then Tawnypelt fell over, knocked down hard to the ground. She felt a few leaves splatter on her, a light spray of fresh, earthy green.

When she moved again, her paws and her body seemed to float into the wind like a mist. Dawnpelt was on the ground not moving.

"Were you looking for me?" A hiss came out from a voice somewhere deep in the mist.

Tawnypelt, unsure if she would be able to speak, remained silent.

"You know I am here!" The voice boomed.

Tawnypelt opened her eyes suddenly. The shadow was looming over her, but this time it was different. Its curls of dark smoke were rising from her. Tawnypelt shuddered as she glanced around nervously.

"Where am I? What happened?"

The shadow moved closer to her face as she spoke. Its blackness seemed to swallow her up until she could see nothing but its darkness everywhere.

"You! You thought you could defeat me."

Suddenly, the shadow rushed into her pelt, and she felt a fire inside of her roaring.

This isn't right!

She felt she would explode, break into tiny pieces all over the forest land, until gradually, a cooling sensation like water rushed through her, making her pelt stand on end stiffly.

The shadow cat hissed and wailed as Tawnypelt's shadow encroached upon it, moving towards it as if it wanted to sink its dark, empty teeth into the other shadow.

"You will go now!" It roared.

And then the first shadow disappeared. The second one moved down, becoming smaller, as it met Tawnypelt on the ground.

Tawnypelt knew it was her shadow, but she didn't understand what had just happened.

"You are in danger." The shadow began.

"No!" Tawnypelt interrupted impatiently. "The cats were attacked. You didn't come. Why didn't you come?"

As the shadow grew closer, she was shaking violently with anger. Its cold smoke billowed in her face as it spoke, making her feel chilled by its icy mist.

"I don't need to save the Clan cats." It snapped.

"Of course, you do." Tawnypelt's fur bristled. "If you are not going to save us, then what is the purpose of you?!"

"You think I care if Clan cats are saved?" The shadow laughed darkly. Then it's voice became smaller. "I'm only here because of one cat." It lunged towards Tawnypelt as its raspy voice whispered in her ear.

"You."

Tawnypelt jumped, suddenly aware she had slept on the ground in front of the ice lake. She felt the coldness of the shadow engulfing her, all around her, but she couldn't see it. Dawnpelt was asleep near her.

As she scanned the area around her, she trembled uncontrollably.

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Hawkwing opened his eyes to find Squirrelstar next to him. She was asleep in a nearby nest, curled up and breathing softly.

"Is she alright?" He looked over at Jayfeather.

Jayfeather snorted, ignoring his question. Leafpool came to check on him as she spoke.

"Yes, she is fine. She is just tired."

Leafpool hesitated then went back to the herbs she was chewing.

"Here, take this. It is good for preventing infection."

"What happened to you out there?" Leafpool tried to sound casual as she asked.

"Dogs." Hawkwing sighed as he rested his head. "A dog attacked us. I think they smelled the prey we were hunting. We tried to escape them, but they decided to try to catch us instead."

"It's good that none of you were seriously hurt." Leafpool added.

Crowstar entered the medicine den, and Jayfeather shot him a deadly look.

"Hawkwing, it's good that you are awake now. Leafstar has told me to tell her when you wake up."

"I don't think this is the time, Crowstar. He is trying to recover."

Crowstar looked at Leafpool then at Hawkwing. "I will tell her, but I don't know if she will listen. She said it is urgent."

Leafpool rolled her eyes. "You warriors need to get your priorities right sometimes. Can't you see how weak he is now?"

Crowstar had already backed out from the medicine den.

Leafpool hoped, and wished with all her heart, that there would be peace, and Leafstar wouldn't come. But she knew that would be too good to be true.

Moments later, Leafstar's voice travelled into the quiet of the medicine den.

"Lead me to him!"

Leafpool sighed as she heard the leader's voice booming outside the medicine den.

Hawkwing looked over at Leafpool with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Hawkwing!" Leafstar roared as she pushed herself into the medicine den. "How dare you!"

Squirrelstar shook, moving abruptly at the uproar caused by Leafstar.

Leafstar glared at Squirrelstar then back at Hawkwing.

"I want to speak to my deputy alone." She said coldly.

"Squirrelstar is not well, Leafstar. She is resting." Leafpool's voice was calm as she placed herself next to her sister's nest.

"Of course, she is not well! She is with kits, and she broke the code!"

Squirrelstar shuddered. Hawkwing's eyes widened in astonishment.

"How- what are you talking about?"

"Both of you have forgotten your Clans when they need you, and now neither of you can perform your duties!"

"With kits?" Hawkwing's voice cracked, so small that it broke Squirrelstar to listen to it.

Leafstar glared at Hawkwing. "Why do you think she is in the medicine den instead of with her Clan?"

"No." Hawkwing shook his head. "It's not true. I may have been close to Squirrelstar, but she is not with kits."

Squirrelstar looked dejectedly at the ground, ashamed.

"I am not accepting this." Hawkwing continued with a nervous glance at her.

"It's true, Hawkwing. I think now that we all know, we need to move on and take care of both of you. This discussion is not going to help either of you get better." Leafpool eyed Leafstar warily.

Hawkwing shook his head again. "No, I don't accept this. It's not possible."

"What is that suppose to mean?" Squirrelstar finally spoke. Her eyes were filled with melancholy shock, as her gaze widened.

"I am a SkyClan deputy."

"Hawkwing," Leafpool began tenderly, "I saw you with Squirrelstar. You can't deny the relationship you had with her. All the Clans know."

Hawkwing shot up from his nest, wincing painfully. "What? All the Clans know? And when were you planning on telling me if indeed I am the father of your kits?" His eyes became cold as he stared at Squirrelstar.

"I just found out before you went on patrol. I was going to tell you." Squirrelstar sighed hopelessly.

Leafpool nudged Squirrelstar, motioning her to join her outside. Squirrelstar didn't hesitate, following her sister to the crisp, outside air. But Leafstar followed them out of the den, despite the discomfort of the two she-cats.

"See what happens when cats break the code?" She arched her brow and lashed her tail as she padded past them.

Crowstar, who remained in front of the medicine den, stared at Leafpool with a heart-wrenching expression on his face, as if he had been stung.

But Leafpool could not linger with him. As soon as she turned her

head, Squirrelstar had disappeared. Her ginger tail flashed in the distance of the marshes.

Chapter 22

Under the light of the moon, Squirrelstar sniffed her way around the forest. There was very little signs of prey. The air was crisp, yet calm. Somehow Squirrelstar felt that she was at ease with being alone.

Her plans had unraveled unexpectedly, and despite her best efforts to do the right thing, Leafpool had been right. Now Hawkwing was furious with her, many cats were against her, and she found herself in the loneliness place possible, even though she was surrounded by the scents of so many cats. All of them didn't help. They might as well not even be around her.

The only cat who would help her, she was ashamed to face. She knew her sister had been right. Nothing good had come from telling the Clans the truth. And yet as she looked about the shadows of the forest, they somehow seemed peaceful. There was tranquility in their stillness.

As she wandered about the leaves in the bushes, looking for shelter, relief washed over her. Leaf-bare was drawing to a close, but it was definitely too cold for her to sleep in the open air. Finding shelter was difficult, much to her dismay, because many animals were still hibernating in their dens. Squirrelstar was determined not to give up. She knew she couldn't go back to camp after Hawkwing's reaction, and she had to find another option.

Her tail flopped lifelessly through the bushes. She padded through them solemnly, twisting through them. Sniffing the air, she decided there was a faint smell of rabbit, but it was very far.

Was it safe for her to be out so far from camp with the shadow cat lurking about?

I'll just have to find out, she thought to herself.

Moving further away, the webs of tree branches were hanging over her head, blocking some of the cold air while darkening the light of the moon. It was so dark that for a moment, Squirrelstar wondered again if she was doing the right thing.

She found the smell of rabbit, faint again, but there was no sign of it. Moving up and scenting the air, she came upon a small, dark den. Unhealthy looking leaves were growing around it, and it was hard for her to see all the way inside. But she couldn't resist the inviting warmth coming from within it.

I don't scent anything in here. Hope washed through her pelt.

For a moment, Squirrelstar hesitated, not knowing whether to turn and look for the rabbit or to rest in the den. She felt ravenous, and at the same time, her paws ached. The weakness of her hunger felt like a heavy burden on her, pulling her to the warmth and darkness of the den. She stood at the entrance, torn between hunger and rest.

A burst of wind blew in her direction, and she shivered.

If I stay out here, I will get cold searching for the rabbit, and that won't be good for me or the kits. It's not worth the risk.

Squirrelstar had much to think about inside the den, but her mind became mushy as the warmth lulled her to sleep.

She curled up, fluffing her tail and wrapping it around her to keep her warm.

When Squirrelstar woke, there was a soft dripping sound further back in the cave. Moving to stretch her paws out, she found that she couldn't do it. Her body ached with weakness.

I need to eat, she murmured to herself. *I will have to go back to the camp eventually*, she sighed. I *can't take care of myself on my own with the kits now, although I wish I could stay here. I wish I could forget*

everything that has happened. She closed her eyes tightly.

Something alerted her outside. Her ears pricked up, and she abruptly opened her bright green eyes. In the distance, she could hear a faint conversation, but the drip drop of the rain outside was making it harder to hear. Curious, Squirrelstar moved slowly, low to the ground, closer to the entrance of the den, but not too close so that she could be seen.

A foul, nauseating smell threatened the entrance of the den, and Squirrelstar had to hold her breath to prevent herself from vomiting. The voice was low, but she had no doubt who it was.

"***I need to follow through with the plan***." It hissed the last word like a snake.

Squirrelstar jumped at the sound of the female cat as she heard her speak. Her voice was so normal it shocked her.

"No, we can't follow through without Jessy. We need her to help distract the Clans. Otherwise, the plan won't work. Now she is ill, and we can't use her. We must wait and be patient." The female cat added thoughtfully.

"***I don't trust Jessy.***" The raspy, smoky voice said. "***Do you think she can be trusted***?"

"Only time will tell perhaps. But I will not hesitate to kill her if she gets in the way of our plan. The most important thing now is to keep our identity secret."

"***Tawnypelt***." The voice, snarled loudly over the serene drops of rainfall.

"She is a threat to us, but as long as we distract her, she won't understand what is going on completely. She won't have time to figure it out before we succeed with our plan. We have discussed the first stage of our plan. We don't need Jessy for it. I need you to be ready in case anything goes wrong. I have good news from the Clans. It make everything easier for us." She purred.

"What news from the Clans?"

"He is in the medicine den now badly injured, which is more than we could have ever hoped for. It gives us the perfect opportunity to strike against him. We need to get rid of him to proceed with the plan. Let us wait and see what we will do with Jessy. Now we need to focus on getting rid of ***him.***"

Squirrelstar unconsciously jumped in alarm.

Him! He's in the medicine den, badly injured. Oh no, that can only mean- Hawkwing!

Her eyes widened, and she had to do everything in her power to hold herself down. I must get back to camp now.

But she couldn't, trapped between the den and the evil outside. She squirmed restlessly. Outside, an awkward silence had fallen over the voices. Only the sound of rain was heard.

Are they gone? Squirrelstar peered towards the entrance, trying desperately to stop herself from padding over there.

Moving slowly and ever so cautiously, she peered towards the entrance. It was full of darkness, the silhouette of a black shadow blocking it. Squirrelstar began to breathe heavily, fear shaking every part of her body. She closed her eyes, trapped against the back of the den, and the curling tendrils moving towards her.

"No!" The female cat yowled. Suddenly, the shadow whished back out to the marshes. Squirrelstar was not convinced she was safe though.

Why would the shadow leave her unharmed?

"We must leave. I scent something nearby." The female cat's voice was commanding. A low growl was heard, then it was silent.

Squirrelstar waited. Shortness of breath threatened to overcome her.

I have to get back to Hawkwing now.

Her eyes scanned the area with a sudden fear.

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Leafpool padded through the foliage, trying desperately to pick up Squirrelstar's scent. It had been some time since she had fled the camp, and the light rain had nearly erased all of her scent. Leafpool felt determined that she wouldn't let her sister go. Anything could be out there. Her amber eyes scanned the massive expanse of land.

But without any scent, she could be anywhere. Leafpool thought hopelessly.

She plopped to the ground, fatigued by her worries for her sister. She felt she couldn't move anymore, and uncertainty halted her thoughts.

Behind her, a rustling sound in the bushes alerted her.

It's not Squirrelstar, Leafpool thought as she scented the air, disappointed.

As Leafpool rose to her paws, Leafstar broke through a bush, shaking out the specks of green and ice from her pelt.

"Why are you out here alone? This is against the rules, and you know it." She narrowed her eyes at Leafpool, then shortly scanned the area around them.

"I saw Squirrelstar come through this area, then it began to rain, and I lost her scent. I can't leave her alone with kits and the shadow cat." Leafpool's eyes were wide. She was surprised that Leafstar wouldn't be more understanding.

Leafstar shrugged with a hint of annoyane. "I don't know why Squirrelstar decided to do this to herself, and all the other cats at a time like this." She sighed.

Leafpool felt her pelt bristle, and she was about ready to lose her temper when Leafstar spoke again.

"The rain will dry tomorrow. Then we can have a patrol look for her. For now, let's return you back to camp. Your Clan needs you."

Leafpool looked at Leafstar blankly. Hesitatingly, she looked out into the distance when she spoke.

"You are right, Leafstar, I need to get back to camp and check on Firestar. He might be giving the other medicine cats a hard time with his medicine."

The two she-cats padded back to the camp, and Leafpool tried to reassure herself that Squirrelstar would be back soon. She knew her sister would never abandon her Clan, no matter how hard it was to live with them.

They had just approached the camp when they heard the sound of paws behind them. Squirrelstar broke through the marshes in front of them, short of breath. Leafstar and Leafpool turned, alarmed, as they looked at her. Her fur was bushed out, her green eyes were darting everywhere, and she couldn't speak as if she had been attacked.

"What is wrong, Squirrelstar?" Leafpool went over to her sister to nudge her head affectionately.

"I must speak to Hawkwing now. And Jessy too." She added, glancing over at Leafstar.

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The cats in the camp slowly turned their heads towards Squirrelstar when she entered the camp. Their whispers were low. Squirrelstar forced herself to hold her head up high as she padded straight towards the medicine den. Leafstar followed behind her, but didn't say a word, too alarmed by Squirrelstar's demeanor.

Hawkwing looked over at Squirrelstar guiltily, then looked away. She sat next to his nest, eyeing him carefully.

"Are you alright?" Squirrelstar didn't know where to begin because she suddenly remembered how angry he was with her.

"I'm fine." He said shortly.

"Hawkwing, forget about me and everything I have told you today.

You are in danger." Her voice trembled slightly as she continued. "When I was outside, the shadow was there with a female cat."

Crowstar loudly rushed into the medicine den. "What did you say?" He looked like he had a storm brewing in his eyes.

"There was a female cat speaking to the shadow. She wants to kill Hawkwing, and she may kill Jessy." Squirrelstar looked over at the rogue. "I am here to warn both of them."

Crowstar began pacing the medicine den. "We have to get rid of this shadow cat. There is no escaping it!"

"It is making plans." Squirrelstar said it in a small voice.

Crowstar nearly jumped, fury roaring inside of him. "What plans? It just recently attacked. What did you hear it say?"

Squirrelstar shook her head, frustrated. "I heard it mention that they have a plan, and they need Jessy to be well to carry it out. But if she betrays them, they will kill her. They want to kill Hawkwing too." She shook her head again, as if flustered by the memories. "Then the shadow started to come towards me, and for some reason, the she-cat told it to stop and it listened. It didn't attack me."

"Thank StarClan it didn't!" Leafpool rushed to her sister's side.

Hawkwing was looking straight ahead, his gaze clouded.

"I need to discuss this with Tigerstar, Reedstar, and Leafstar." Crowstar turned to leave.

Squirrelstar looked at Jessy curiously, surprised by her reaction. For the first time, the rogue was silent, not arguing, and staring ahead at the entrance. Squirrelstar could have sworn she saw the rogue flinch in her nest. She looked at Squirrelstar then curled up and wrapped her tail protectively over her belly.

"I am sorry." Squirrelstar whispered to Hawkwing. He didn't make eye contact with her, but as she padded out of the den, his eyes followed her from behind.

"Wait!" Leafpool cried out. "You need to stay here. You are not going anywhere." Leafpool nudged her sister back to a nest. "You must be in shock. Let me fetch you some fresh kill."

"It's alright, I will do it." Alderheart rose to his paws and left the medicine den. Squirrelstar looked down at the ground awkwardly, her eyes feeling heavy. She couldn't open them again until she scented the smell of a fresh vole nearby.

Grateful, she swallowed it down in gulps. Jessy looked over at her with weary eyes.

"Who's kits are they?" Her eyes were full of suspicion, and her voice had a hint of darkness in it.

Squirrelstar didn't answer, and neither did Hawkwing.

Jessy cleared her voice and spoke louder. "Are they Brambleclaw's kits?"

"No." Squirrelstar mewed quickly before the she-cat could start wailing loudly for Brambleclaw. The last thing she needed was a fight. "They're not."

Jessy's fur smoothed, although her eyes were still narrowed. As long as the kits didn't concern her kits or Brambleclaw, she did not care much.

An uneasy silence hit the medicine den. No one could find words to speak. Squirrelstar had just started to close her eyes in serenity when the silence was broken abruptly.

"I'm nauseous." Jessy looked up at the medicine cats around her. She found sleeping Goosefeather the nearest to her.

"You!" Jessy shoved Goosefeather with one paw.

Goosefeather squinted up at her as he lifted his head from his paws. "What?" He murmured sleepily and half-aware.

"Aren't you a medicine cat?"

"I-"

"Give me something for my stomach. I feel nauseous." Jessy blinked expectantly at Goosefeather. It took him a moment to catch on, then he sat up.

"Featherwhisker, can you get something for this cat's nausea? Is your name Featherwhisker?" He cocked his head in a friendly manner, trying hard to remember.

"My name is Jessy." Jessy's voice was flat and dark. Her gaze smoldered Goosefeather for a moment, then she moved from her nest. Her paws were a bit wobbly, and she tilted from side to side as she attempted to pad out of the den.

"Where do you think you are going?" Yellowfang rolled her eyes as the clumsy rogue attempted to leave. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Jessy, I don't think you should be going-" Squirrelstar added.

Before she could finish, Jessy's legs buckled beneath her and she collapsed. She fell straight on Brambleclaw as he was entering the medicine den. "What's wrong with her! Hurry Jayfeather, get over here!"

Jessy began to vomit violently all over Brambleclaw's paws.

"She's probably just fine!" Jayfeather grumbled under his breath, padding into the medicine den. He tossed a few flimsy stalks of marigold into the medicine storage, then returned to where Jessy was close to the medicine den entrance. He placed a paw on her belly and listened carefully with his expressionless eyes. Jessy was breathing hard, but she had stopped vomiting.

"What is it, Jayfeather?" Yellowfang joined him, looking down upon the rogue cat.

"The kits are coming." Jayfeather announced. "Help me move her back to the nest." Yellowfang moved in front of Brambleclaw. Her bright eyes glared at him, as Brambleclaw continued to stare blankly ahead at his mate.

"Is that why she vomited?" Brambleclaw asked anxiously, suddenly snapped back to reality.

"No, she's been sick. She's been vomiting for ages! We can't even put her in the nursery." Jayfeather's tail was lashing, and the blind grey tabby's fur was bristling with impatience.

"Fetch Leafpool." Jayfeather added. "She has the most experience with kits."

"I'll get her." Squirrelstar offered.

"No, you're with kits! You need to rest. Sit back down. Brambleclaw, if you are going to stay here, stop being a useless lump of fur and fetch Leafpool!" Jayfeather growled, his frustration growing.

"But Jessy- I don't want to leave her."

"Jessy needs Leafpool, not you!" Jayfeather looked ready to bite Brambleclaw if he didn't leave.

Jayfeather hooked a clump of moss up and dipped it into a dripping pool of water before placing it down next to Jessy, who lapped it up frantically. Her expression was deeply pained, and she kept twitching in agony.

"Breathe." Jayfeather instructed.

"Here." Leafpool placed a stick near Jessy. "Bite down on it when you need to." Leafpool's voice was so gentle as she spoke. Squirrelstar stared at her sister, amazed at how she could talk to a cat like Jessy with so much patience and care. But then, Leafpool had always put her duty as a medicine cat before anything else.

Jessy let out an ear-splitting screech and bit down on the stick, shattering it to splinters as a small, squirming kit rolled out. "It's a she-cat." Leafpool's voice lit up with satisfaction, as she placed the brown kit in Jayfeather's paws. Jayfeather gently nipped the sac and began licking the dark brown pelt, trying to warm it. He then placed it near Jessy's belly as it squeaked in a small meow.

"One more." Leafpool called.

Jessy let out another shriek as the final kit tumbled next to its littermate. Leafpool nipped the sack. "A tom!" Leafpool's voice was full of joy, as she looked upon the small lump, licking it, and then placing it next to Jessy and its littermate. The kit teetered on its paws for a moment, then fell deep into Jessy's fur, snuggling against it peacefully.

Jessy blinked down at her kits, and for a moment, Squirrelstar forgot all the evil actions the rogue had committed. All the cats in the den did. Even Jayfeather's mood was light with the feeling in the air.

Brambleclaw had rushed to Jessy, pressing his nose against hers, but she hardly seemed to notice. He curled up next to her nest as he gazed down at his kits.

Squirrelstar looked upon them, just hoping her birth would be like that. But when she looked over at Hawkwing, he wouldn't even meet her gaze.

Squirrelstar inhaled sharply. *I will reach that point when I get there.*

One by one, the medicine cats moved towards the entrance of the den with curiosity. Their furry heads tried to peek over each other. Loud yowls and meows were coming from outside, and they were growing in intensity.

"What's going on outside?" Squirrelstar asked, looking at the medicine cats towards the entrance. Some of them had left.

But none of them answered her.

Chapter 23

Squirrelstar watched in confusion as the commotion outside grew louder, along with a few accusing meows.

"What's happening?" Squirrelstar repeated her question to Leafpool. Leafpool didn't answer for a second. Her eyes were fixated on the cats outside.

Slowly, she turned to meet Squirrelstar's gaze with an anxious blink. "I think you should see this."

Carefully, Squirrelstar padded outside into the bright morning sun. Furry pelts of all colors were squished together in the camp center. Some of them glimmered with stars, while others were alive. She pushed her way through delicately, lifting her head to try to see above their heads.

The cats had gathered around a single mouse on the ground. Claw marks had ripped it open violently, and the mouse looked shriveled. Its grey fur was splattered with large blotches of blood. The heart of the mouse had been ripped out and placed on top of it like a mound, crushing its limp, lifeless body. On top of its heart, several black colored berries were placed delicately.

Crowstar was looking at it while lashing his tail. "Some cat came in the middle of the clearing and ripped open this mouse, before any other cats were able to take from the fresh kill pile. Now because we don't know who touched it, or if it is safe, we will lose this piece of prey. I want whoever did this to come forth now. We need all the prey for all of these Clans, and any cat who knows which cat broke the code by doing this, should speak so now."

The cats exchanged glances, whispering to one another. Tigerstar's

amber eyes burned into the mouse, his fur bristled. He looked over in the distance to a cat, but it was not clear which one.

"I believe this is a sign about the shadow cat-" Tigerstar began.

"How can you be sure this is a sign about the shadow cat? The last time there was a sign, it was not real, and it was only there to mislead us."

Tigerstar stared at Jayfeather after he spoke. "I am your Clan leader now, and you shouldn't interrupt me."

Ivypool cleared her throat and glared at Tigerstar.

"I mean, I am the current leader of ThunderClan, and you shouldn't interrupt me. Let me finish. The last time there was a sign, that was of Tigerstar. Every cat knew his spirit died in the Dark Forest, and while it was clearly a sign, it was nearly impossible that Tigerstar was alive. It was misleading. Now this is different because it is a symbol of a cat alive, living among us. I understand this sign because I know the cat who put it here, and I know why she had Jessy kill me."

The cats' wide-eyes were lodged onto Tigerstar as he made his case, pacing in the center of the camp. His amber eyes were as clear as the morning sun, even though he was a glimmering spirit.

"There is one cat who would plan to kill me. One cat who wouldn't mind working with a rogue to bring down the Clans just to be leader, and one cat who is not loyal to me. She would do anything to take control over ShadowClan."

The cats followed Tigerstar's deadly expression to the black and white form of Berryheart.

"You!" He scowled bitterly. "You never could accept me being leader, and now your disloyalty to me has made you a threat to all the Clans. How far would you go to take over ShadowClan? You would betray even StarClan? I knew from the moment I saw you, you have been isolating yourself, doing strange things in the empty marshes, instead of being here at camp. You didn't sit at vigil for me

when I died. You were eyeing Cloverfoot and questioning her, hoping that you could bring her down too with your endless interrogations. You will never hurt ShadowClan or any other Clan anymore!"

Tigerstar lunged forward at Berryheart just as her mate, Sparrowtail, jumped in front of her. Both toms rolled on the ground, their claws unsheathed.

Crowstar moved in front of Tigerstar, and Reedstar moved to block Sparrowtail from further attack. Crowstar looked at the three cats with frustration. Berryheart was scornful, and her eyes were blazing.

"I am a loyal ShadowClan warrior." She glared defiantly at every cat around her. "I would never do what Tigerstar is accusing me of."

Sparrowtail lashed his tail in a single stroke, his eyes focused on Tigerstar still. "My mate is not the shadow cat." He spoke flatly.

Breezepelt padded up, putting himself in the middle of the discussion.

From the elders den, Dustpelt's cracked voice bellowed, "She does have a motive."

Breezepelt's amber eyes were thoughtful as he looked at his father. "She did try to overthrow Tigerstar before, and she joined Darktail's kin."

"And you fought for the Dark Forest, Breezepelt! I am a loyal ShadowClan cat, even if I never liked Tigerstar, that doesn't mean I would hurt my Clan and any other Clan." Berryheart snapped back.

"Quiet everyone!" Crowstar yowled. "Before we all become bee-brained, we need to think about the situation for what it is. Tigerstar has a point, and yet, Jayfeather does too. How can we be sure that this is a genuine sign? Why would a cat do this? Because of these questions, we need more answers."

Several cats sighed around him.

"Berryheart, you are a suspect. You do have a motive like Tigerstar said. So for that reason, you will be put in isolation under watch until we have enough time to see whether the shadow strikes again or not. If nothing happens again in our Clans, we will know that you are behind all of this, and you will be killed for your crimes. For now, you will be guarded until you are proven innocent."

Tigerstar purred.

Berryheart blinked her eyes, trying to bury her rage internally. Sparrowtail brushed her back gently with his tail, but his gaze burned into Crowstar accusingly.

Yarrowleaf padded up to Tigerstar and Crowstar, glaring at them both. "This is ridiculous."

"So are you going to defy two Clan leaders, Yarrowleaf?" Cloverfoot narrowed her eyes as she spoke. "Are you going to defy them too, Berryheart?"

Both cats looked down silently, their gazes still restless.

"We will not bring any harm to you, Berryheart, if you are innocent. I promise you this." Crowstar added.

Tigerstar snorted and rolled his eyes.

Crowstar continued again when it became silent. "Squirrelstar also has news, and I believe it is related to this sign. Only time will tell us if this sign is a distraction or not. But for sure we know from Squirrelstar that she heard the shadow and its cat speaking to each other, and they are planning to kill Hawkwing and possibly Jessy. We need to move Hawkwing into the warriors den, where one of the medicine cats can stay with him till he is fully recovered."

"Who cares about Jessy? We shouldn't waste our efforts watching a rogue. Less waste of fresh kill if she dies." Breezepelt sneered under his breath.

Crowstar continued, brushing off his son's remark. "Leafpool, is it possible to move Jessy? I know she is very ill."

Leafpool stepped forward from the entrance of the medicine den. "Jessy has kitted. Her body is very fragile right now, and she is having a hard time staying awake. I fear to move her because we do not know if her sickness is gone, and whether other cats can get it."

"So be it then," Crowstar continued. "We will keep her in the medicine den, and have a warrior remain guard at the entrance. Are there any cats willing to stand guard by the medicine den?"

No one answered. Several low snickers were heard.

"Do you really think any warrior will offer to protect a rogue who killed a Clan leader?" Tigerstar's furious voice was seething, and he was ready to explode at Crowstar.

"I suppose that is understandable, but her kits are still Brambleclaw's, and Brambleclaw wants to raise them as ThunderClan cats. We have to respect that." Crowstar mused. "But since it is difficult for any cat to help the rogue, I will choose a different warrior to watch over the entrance each day."

"Will Hawkwing be able to move?" He looked at Leafpool when he asked.

Yellowfang bumped her way through the cats, her flat face glaring at Crowstar. "You do know, there are other medicine cats you can ask." Her voice was blistering. "And yes, I think if several of us work together, we will be able to move him."

"I am fine now." Squirrelstar spoke suddenly. All the cats turned towards her.

"But you have to stay in the nursery, Squirrelstar. You don't know when the kits will come." Leafpool reminded her gently. Torn, Squirrelstar stared at the ground. She found the other cats watching her silently, measuring her reaction.

"Squirrelstar, you have to do as your told in your situation." Tigerstar beamed as he fluffed out his pelt.

"Don't worry, Squirrelstar. Daisy is in the nursery, and she will keep a good watch on you. I want you to stay there because of your kits.

It's what's best for them."

Squirrelstar sighed begrudgingly as she padded with Leafpool to the nursery.

Once they had left, Crowstar turned back to focus on the cats around him. "Are all leaders in agreement with these plans?" He turned as he spoke.

"SkyClan agrees. We will do whatever we need to do to keep Hawkwing safe." Leafstar nodded her head.

"RiverClan agrees also."

Crowstar looked over at Tigerstar, who was looking rather pleased with himself. He could tell from his expression what his answer would be.

"Then it is settled. May StarClan keep us all safe."

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Deep in the warmth of the nursery, Squirrelstar was very uncomfortable. The sweet smell of milk was irritating her, and she longed to go back to the sunlight. The warmth in the nursery was stuffy, and it made her pelt itchy. It wasn't like the fresh warmth of the sunlight. Where her Clan was, where she was needed.

Leafpool had stayed with her, even though Squirrelstar knew she had so many other cats to check. *She is way too protective of me*. Squirrelstar shook her head as she glanced at her sister who seemed to be lost in thought.

Daisy was playing with the kits, telling them stories in an animated voice. Their round lumpy bodies were gathered around her with their eyes following her in excitement, completely mesmerized.

How many times do I have to hear the story of Tigerstar?

Squirrelstar closed her eyes irritated.

I need to be outside making sure Hawkwing is moved to the warriors'

den safely. Squirrelstar glanced over at her sister, who by chance, was staring directly at her, as if she knew what she was thinking.

"Do you think Berryheart is the cat with the shadow?" Leafpool's face was puzzled thoughtfully as she stared at her sister. "I know you heard the voice with the shadow in the forest. Did you recognize it as hers?"

Squirrelstar sighed. She could remember every detail of what happened, the place, what was said, but she couldn't remember the sound of the voice of the female cat, partially because of the rain, and also because she had been too weak and fatigued to remember that one important detail. Something stood out in her mind about the shadow. Its voice was different, hard to forget, but the female cat was just like any other Clan cat. She shuddered at that thought.

She could be any cat with us now.

Leafpool continued to look at Squirrelstar expecting an answer as the kits' voices swelled in the background. They tried so hard to imitate Tigerstar's deep voice, but they were just too squeaky and small.

"No." Squirrelstar said, shaking her head. "I feel like every time I try to do something for my Clan, something holds me back. I can't remember when I want to. I can't move when I want to." She sighed in disgust, looking towards the exit.

"Give yourself credit, Squirrelstar. Carrying kits is not easy, and a lot of the time it drains you from the other activities you need to do. It certainly affects a cat's body in strange ways." She chucked thoughtfully. "It will all be over with soon."

"You should try to get some rest." Leafpool rose to leave, making her sister feel even more down-trodden.

"Rest with all these dark forest kits in here?" Squirrelstar looked fondly at the massive furry balls fighting with each other noisily, tumbling around, bouncing invigoratingly.

Leafpool eyes filled with laughter as she left.

Late that night, all the cats had retired to their nests. The camp was fairly silent except for a few songs from crickets.

Squirrelstar peered at the exit of the nursery, looking at the lazy light of the moon dwindling in with soft steps. The bushes of small kits were sleeping on top of one another. No one seemed to notice that she was awake. Squirrelstar was hopeful suddenly.

If I can just go out for some fresh air- The exit of the den seemed to be calling her in the enchanting light of the moon.

She moved slowly, carefully, not to step on any of the bundles of many colors of fur. When she finally reached the camp, she breathed in the fresh, cool air. Squirrelstar knew that she shouldn't go out of the nursery, but she assured herself she wouldn't be long.

She moved over to the fresh kill pile, sighting a cold, stale piece of vole. She sat down and ate peacefully without any cat to bother her. For the first time, she felt like she was back home in her ThunderClan camp, and everything was normal.

A light breeze swayed in the trees, and Squirrelstar inhaled the air. She felt so much better being in the open air, and she didn't understand why Leafpool didn't want her outside.

As she ate the chewy vole, she noticed a light flickering in the distance through the bushes surrounding the camp. Unsure of what to do, she hesitated. She didn't sense any danger.

It could be from anything, but I have to find out just what it is.

She slowly padded her way to where the beaming light was. It grew brighter and brighter, more luminous, as she got closer. And then it became two eyes, bright and flashing in the night. Squirrelstar scented the air, trying to figure out what it was, but it didn't get any closer to her.

Could this possibly be a threat to the Clans? *Perhaps I should go back and alert the warriors*.

Squirrelstar looked down at her belly and back at the two yellow lights beaming at her. *If I leave whatever this is, it may escape*. She pawed a few steps. *Maybe if I just get a closer look. Whatever it is, it doesn't smell like danger, but I need to be sure. I can't risk it escaping*.

She wasn't sure what to do when suddenly, the two yellow lights disappeared. Squirrelstar padded forward once more, and as she peered closer, she could see two, tiny yellow specks further in the distance. Pushing through the fronds, she padded gently, but more swiftly, as she tried to reach the object. Without realizing what she was doing, Squirrelstar looked around her fearfully. She hadn't realized how far she had moved from the camp.

Deep into the darkness, the yellow eyes continued to move further from her, as if mocking her hesitancy and fear.

In a rage and a sudden burst of tenacity, Squirrelstar began to increase her speed, leaping over the bushes and fronds, hissing angrily at the object that she couldn't reach. She was very far from camp already, but it continued to lead her deeper into the darkness of the night.

Unfortunately, as her speed increased, her clumsiness did too. She tripped over a branch springing out of the ground, and suddenly she felt a sharp wrench of pain in her belly. Her yowl cleared the silence of the night as she remained on the ground helplessly.

Leafpool jumped out of her nest in alarm. She felt something was wrong outside. Quickly padding to exit the medicine den, she found Crowstar outside. He was awake, staring at the ground with a pitiful look on his face. Leafpool didn't bother to speak to him, too distracted by the sound she had heard in her dreams. She could smell only one thing, and she knew what it was- what woke her up.

"Squirrelstar!" She cried out, not realizing that she had spoken aloud.

"Did you see Squirrelstar here in the camp?" She began to scent the bushes and look forward ahead in the distance. She didn't look at

Crowstar as she asked him.

Crowstar shook his head. "I just came here for my evening watch a few moments ago. I didn't see any cat out here so far."

"But Squirrelstar, I scent her. Crowstar, she's been here, and her scent is leading away from the camp! I must go to her! She could be in danger!"

Leafpool jumped forward in pursuit of her sister, only to find Crowstar dragging her back by the scruff.

"I'm not going to let you leave camp without another cat. I have to stay watch here. I will ask a ThunderClan cat to go with you."

When Crowstar came back, he had Lionblaze with him. The sleepy tom was clearly half-awake because he was murmuring about a mouse that had escaped. A dazed expression was on his face.

"Wake up and snap out of it!" Crowstar yowled. "Squirrelstar left the camp, and she is lost. You need to go with Leafpool to find her."

Lionblaze's glassy amber eyes were soft, but they eventually hardened with alarm. He nodded and followed Leafpool into the empty marshes, racing next to her side with full speed.

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Squirrelstar's leg was injured, and she couldn't move it on her own. What was worse, she was deep in unfamiliar territory, and the pain in her stomach was swelling, growing more like a fire. She couldn't stop herself from yowling in pain and crying out like a helpless kit.

Leafpool and Lionblaze could hear her voice in the distance, and they followed her scent through the land until they found her.

She was lying over the erupting branch, her large stomach was heavy and seemed to be moving. Her pain was so intense she didn't even notice the two cats approaching her.

"Quick! We must get her back to camp!" Leafpool cried, her eyes full of anguish. "Oh Squirrestar, why did you leave the safety of the

camp?" She placed a paw on her leg that was limp.

"The fire in my belly won't stop!" She cried out hysterically in response.

Leafpool put her paw on Squirrelstar's belly. Her expression temporarily went blank, then determination fired in the depths of her eyes. She turned to Lionblaze sternly,

"She is having her kits now. I don't know if she will make it back to the camp. It's good we found here when we did."

"Kits?" Lionblaze's expression panicked. "I'm not the cat who should be with you at a time like this!"

"Well," Leafpool said curtly, "you are the one with me, so we will make do with this situation. Get help from the camp, bring me another cat, and some moss balls with water."

Lionblaze raced back to the camp and returned with Willowshine at his side.

"Oh StarClan!" Willowshine exclaimed, as she and Lionblaze placed the moss balls of water near Leafpool.

"Lionblaze, get me a branch for her, Willowshine give her a moss ball of water. I will try to see if the kits are in the right position." Leafpool steadily examined her sister as she yowled helplessly.

"Squirrelstar, focus on your breath. Your kits are in the right position. They are all moving. It is up to you now to focus, and bring them into this world." Leafpool's eyes were warm as she spoke to her sister.

Squirrelstar nodded her head, bit down hard, stifling another yowl, as a plump ball of ginger fur was released from its sac.

"It's a female." Leafpool's eyes smiled. "But you have to keep going Squirrelstar. There is another one."

Once more, Squirrelstar breathed and yowled, breaking her stick in pain. Willowshine broke the sac of the second kit, and placed

another ginger kit near Squirrelstar's belly. Squirrelstar hardly noticed. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

"I can't do this any more!" Squirrelstar's eyes bulged fearfully as she spoke to Leafpool. Leafpool calmly took a moss ball, pressing it to her mouth. "Take a break and drink."

Squirrelstar gulped up the sweet water, and then without control, she yowled again, throwing back her head.

"A third kit!" Willowshine's eyes glowed. "It's a tom, and he's dark grey-" She paused suddenly, and stopped, realizing what that meant.

Willowshine licked him the wrong way with warmth in her eyes, trying to bring his temperature up. He squealed in a small voice.

"This is the last one, Squirrelstar." Leafpool said sternly, as she placed her ear near Squirrelstar's belly. "You are almost done!" She purred with excitement.

Squirrelstar yowled one final time, and Leafpool placed the last kit, a soft brown tom next to her belly. Squirrelstar looked at the four kits, speechless.

"Please, Lionblaze, bring more warriors. We will need the extra help to bring the kits and Squirrelstar back to camp. She won't be able to walk possibly, and if they stay out here unsheltered, they will get too cold."

Lionblaze nodded as he raced back to the camp. Willowshine exchanged joyful, exuberant glances with Leafpool as they curled around the kits to keep them warm.

Further back hidden in the leaves, two yellow eyes remained watching with an iridescent glow.

Epilogue

The cats were eating from the fresh kill pile and bathing in the warmth of the morning sun. Kits were tumbling about, and there was a lot of cheery chatting in the camp. Even Ivypool had somehow managed to adjust to Tigerstar's demands, although she still gave him razor-sharp glares occasionally.

The air was blissful. Many cats had hope, or at least they wanted to hope, that the Clans would go back to normal soon, and the shadow was gone.

Hawkwing was resting in the warriors' den being watched carefully by Violetshine. To his side, Alderheart had made a small herb area and a makeshift nest for himself. Hawkwing was feeling better, but remained somewhat tired. He wondered, gazing longingly at the entrance of the den. He desperately wanted to go outside. He had heard rumors that Squirrelstar had kitted, and his curiosity was peaking. Glancing over at Alderheart, he noticed that the ginger tom was busy preparing herbs, deep in thought. Then he looked at Violetshine who was eating.

Perhaps if both of them are busy, I could find a way to get out.

He cleared his throat, speaking hesitantly. "Do you think I am well enough for fresh air?"

Alderheart looked at Hawkwing, surprised. "Your wound is not completely closed." He clearly was unsure and didn't like the idea.

"I'll just go outside near the entrance of this den. And there are many warriors outside." He added, hoping he could sway Alderheart.

Alderheart didn't respond.

"Please, I need to see my Clan and get some fresh air. Do you really

think my wound will begin bleeding if I pad a few steps?" Hawkwing tried to lighten the situation to his advantage.

Alderheart looked away. His desire to please tore at him, and Hawkwing knew that very well about him. Hawkwing continued to look at him pleadingly, then he added, "If I take too long, you can come bring me back. I promise." He tried to add some warmth in his eyes for persuasion.

Alderheart nodded his head slowly. Eventually his sympathy gave way. Hawkwing stretched delicately, but then Alderheart interrupted him before he could continue.

"But you can only go right outside of the den. No further than that." He stared at Hawkwing's legs. "Perhaps it will do your muscles good. I don't think it will do harm." He nodded again, as if to reassure himself.

Hawkwing slowly padded outside the den to the entrance where all the cats were feasting in the morning sun. Several cats looked at him and nodded in recognition. Hawkwing looked over hesitantly at the nursery, knowing that the clearing was busy, and another cat might see him.

Then he saw Leafpool with the medicine cats. Crowstar had just brought her a piece of prey discreetly. Hawkwing moved towards her.

No one will think anything of a cat speaking to a medicine cat, even if they are from another Clan.

Jayfeather glared disgustedly at Hawkwing's direction when he joined them.

Leafpool's mood looks good, Hawkwing thought cheerfully. She was very bubbly as she spoke to the medicine cats around her. Hawkwing moved closer to her, catching her attention fairly fast.

"Do you mind if I speak to you for a moment, Leafpool? I wanted to ask you a question about my injury. I tried to ask Alderheart, but he told me to double check with you."

Leafpool's gaze puzzled for a moment, then she moved alongside with Hawkwing away from the medicine cats. "You must be feeling much better since Alderheart let you out."

"He thought it wouldn't hurt to stretch a bit." Hawkwing didn't want to add more than that.

"So what did you want to ask me?"

I can't mention Squirrelstar. Maybe other cats will catch on and hear me.

"How are the kits?"

Leafpool blinked, stunned momentarily. Then a warmth started to build up in her eyes.

"They are fine. Very adorable, I might add. Would you like to see them?"

Hawkwing shook his head fervently. "No, of course not." He paused, and padded away suddenly.

Leafpool gaped as she watched him pad away and return back to the den.

Toms are so weird sometimes.

She shook her head as she went back to join the other medicine cats.

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In the loud meows and laughter of the camp, a she-cat gazed longingly at the medicine den, inattentive to the conversations around her. *I*

It's time, finally, she purred to herself, as she left the cats in the clearing and headed towards the dim opening.

No one notices, no one cares, she thought darkly, enjoying the irony of the moment.

And now I have the whole den to myself.

She eyed the other medicine cats in the clearing, stuffing themselves and enjoying the carefree atmosphere. *This is perfect. No one will realize what is going on till it is too late*, she purred silently to herself.

As she moved into the medicine den, she glanced one last time at the opening behind her. The bright sun was flooding the den with a glowing warmth, and her pelt shined in the sunlight. Her eyes were fixated on a ginger tom sleeping before her in his nest. A large wound ran across one of his hind legs to the middle of his back, and he appeared to be in a restless sleep, twitching and unsheathing his claws occasionally. He murmured some vague mutterings, but the she-cat didn't bother to listen to him.

Lightly and smoothly, the she-cat moved cautiously over to the herb storage, sifting through the musty leaves before picking out round, black seeds. She dropped the seeds beside the tom's nest, one by one gently and precisely.

Once she finished, she turned, scanning the entrance once more. She purred softly when she saw no one there. She then padded to the other side of the den discreetly and began to dig at a mound of soft earth.

At first, she felt around with one paw in the hole and looked alarmed. Her gaze clouded with fluster and frustration, then it sharpened with rage. Vigorously, and almost violently, her paw started to sweep through the dirt, faster than ever, breaking it into fine pieces.

Her search became more vehement as a darkness swept through her eyes. She thrusted her paws in the earth impatiently, lashing at it and attacking it viciously. Dirt spattered out, flying in all directions.

She stepped back abruptly and purred suddenly. Her eyes grew big with delight as she looked down upon a few stalks of long, lavender colored herbs hidden deep in the dirt, so deep that she almost could not find them. Her flailing paws had wilted them a bit, but her pelt relaxed as she looked upon them in a temporary trance. A scheming

glow filled her eyes.

"I thought I had lost them." She muttered, shaking her head. "I need to work faster before someone comes."

She took the lavender herbs, placing them next to the other herbs neatly together in a mechanical way. The tom was still moving restlessly, his head flinching. The she-cat locked her eyes on him and picked up a handful of seeds. Her face was obviously anticipating his movements.

She tilted her head as she tried to nudge them towards the ginger tom. He groaned slightly from her movement, turning his head away from her in irritation.

But he was too sleepy and bleary to open his eyes. The she-cat's eyes were hungrily looking down upon him, as if she had almost caught him in her grasp. Using her paw, she delicately turned his face back to her and tipped the copious amount of black seeds down his mouth, one by one. Each time she dropped one, her whiskers would twitch with anxiety.

Then she waited patiently. She sprawled herself out on the cold ground of the den, stretching her paws out. Her eyes never left the tom for a second, glaring with resentment and fury silently.

She did not move or make a sound. Once his breathing slowed and he stopped twitching, her pelt relaxed and smoothed. She padded closer to him, opening his jaws slightly, and slid the meadow saffron into his mouth. There were too many of them, one after another. Every time, she massaged his throat for a few seconds until he swallowed them.

"Perfect." She purred. An insane glaze of happiness glowed in her eyes as she watched the tom with pleasure. She spoke to herself as if someone was with her.

"It is risky." She continued talking as she checked the entrance then smiled, "but it worked."

Her brows lifted with satisfactory delight. She purred quietly, her

voice was unnaturally sweet. She continued talking to herself, amused by her own conversation.

"The other medicine cats were fools to let me watch him." Her eyes laughed darkly. Then she couldn't help herself.

She let out a low, rumbling purr that echoed in the den a bit too loud. Her body shook from her purring as she tried to contain it, but she couldn't help but relish in the pleasure of success.

A brown she-cat's eyes popped open in alarm at the sound. She was curled around the sleeping forms of two small kits. She lifted her head slowly, shocked, and terrified to see what was with her in the den. She already knew, but it was too late.

She knew the sound of the she-cat, and she knew what her presence in the den meant. She quickly wrapped all her body around her kits protectively. Her eyes were fearful as the panic boiled inside of her. She scanned the den helplessly, silently crying out for help, only to find she was alone with the demented cat. She began to tremble as she stared at the den's floor. Panic was overwhelming her.

The other she-cat whirled around, sensing her. She stared down at her darkly. Her eyes narrowed with uncertain motives.

Both she-cats stared at each other, anticipating the other's movements, until Jessy's panic boiled over. She couldn't stop herself any longer.

She opened her mouth to let out a loud meow to alert the warriors outside, but the other cat rose to her paws, outraged, and fuming with madness. A dark, shadowy form slowly twirled out of her body, much to the brown she-cat's horror, and it swallowed her so fast in its blackness, she didn't have the chance to cry for help.

Jessy's lifeless form stared straight ahead at the ceiling with a blank, stunned expression.

The spirit of Jessy rose from her dead, lifeless body, only to see the medicine den covered in the blackness of the shadow still. It surrounded her, and she could hardly see through it. Her eyes

darted everywhere, until she found her kits beside her lifeless body.

"No!" She whispered in a sobbing voice. "Not my kits!"

She moved protectively in front of them, just as the shadow dived straight into her spirit and broke it apart. It dissolved into thin air, lost forever. All that remained was her dead body, and the kits buried in its fur.

The she-cat shook her head at the shadow cat with a mad humor in her eyes, but she was not upset. Her pelt was shining with satisfaction. She flicked her tail at it, as if to bring it back under control. The shadow grew smaller into a small, foggy mist with a indignant huff, moving back to her almost unwillingly. Its mist surrounded the she-cat until it became one with her. She closed her eyes peacefully as it retreated. And then it was gone.

The she-cat let out a pleased purr, this time uninterrupted, as the shadow was rejoined with her body once more. Looking at her success in the medicine den, she lifted her head proudly and padded to leave.

She entered the camp casually where it was filled with cats who were oblivious to her reappearance. Their loud, invigorating musings were incessant over the golden light of the morning. The she-cat's eyes were gleaming with content as she went to fetch her kill.

My work is finished. Her mind was full of hysterical cackles as she greeted the cats around her with a friendly voice.

In the medicine den, one of the kits pushed its tiny, weak paws up against its mother's unmoving belly. It plopped down clumsily letting out a small, pitiful squeak when its mother didn't respond. Then it moved back towards her belly, continuing to squeal. Its small voice became more frantic as it squished its face in her fur helplessly.

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Squirrelstar yawned.

Do kits ever sleep?

She wondered as she watched with half-opened eyes. Pebblekit wouldn't stop moving, and his squirming was keeping Squirrelstar awake. She could feel him awkwardly fumbling around, knocking into her when he lost his balance. He was attempting to jump over Maplekit, determined to reach her, but his aim was off.

He fell and rolled out of the nest eventually with a small squeak. Squirrelstar sighed and pulled him back to the nest with her tail, but once he reached the nest, he tumbled over and landed on Cherrykit.

Cherrykit let out an indignant squeal and squirmed underneath her brother, protesting quite loudly. Before she could escape from him, Coalkit decided to join in, pulling himself onto the pile and squeaking with delight. Maplekit looked at her three littermates, and teetered over to them, planting herself on top of Coalkit and then closing her eyes with satisfaction.

The four lumps were piled on each other, squealing and squeaking with amusement and mischief. Squirrelstar nudged the balls of fluff back into the nest before their self-made kit tower would fall over. Her gaze was exhausted but warm.

Leafpool's tabby brown head poked into the nursery. Her eyes were shining. "How are the kits? I just wanted to check them before I go back to the medicine den."

Squirrelstar couldn't stop the smile in her expression. "The kits are fine." She assured her sister.

Leafpool blinked, relieved. "I was worried that Jessy's sickness might spread to them, but thankfully, I don't think it was contagious." She blinked contently at Squirrelstar. "I will come check on you later. Daisy, make sure she's resting not wandering around." Leafpool lifted her brow mischievously before she left Squirrelstar's view.

"Wandering around-" Squirrelstar rolled her eyes, humored at the thought. The kits were finally settling down after wriggling for what seemed ages. For once, her nest was quiet compared to the laughter and bustle outside in the camp. She closed her eyes finally. As she finally felt relief from the kits winding down, she sighed. Their breathing was finally slowing down, and their eyes were squeezed shut tightly as they sniffed slightly in their sleep.

The atmosphere was perfect now for Squirrelstar to finally get some rest. But she felt uneasy. Something was keeping her awake. She didn't know why, despite her fatigue, she couldn't relax. Her mind was restless, much to her frustration and disappointment. She moved abruptly rising to her paws, making sure not to disturb her kits.

Something's wrong.

She could sense it. Her pelt trembled with worry. Moving gently from her kits, she got closer to the opening of the nursery.

She could hear a faint cry in the distance then voices becoming louder and louder. Outside the sounds of yowls and cries spread. They were almost deafening now, finding their way into the quiet of the nursery.

All of the queens' heads shot up in alarm. Their fur bristled and their eyes widened in horror, staring at the entrance with dread. Wrapping their tails around their kits, they tried to hush them, but even they were alarmed.

"Keep your voices down!" Cinnamontail whispered scoldingly. Squirrelstar reached out to pull her wandering kit by the scruff, and placed it next to her safely. The Queens didn't dare go outside, shielding the kits with the weight of their bodies and burrowing them close.

What is going on?

Squirrelstar saw the fear in their eyes. They were just staring at each other. Their eyes glimmered in the dim lighting of the den, expressive and tortured. A sour feeling grew inside of Squirrelstar.

Is the shadow cat here?

Brambleclaw's loud yowl rose over all the cats. The sound of it made every hair on Squirrelstar's pelt raise.

"Jessy!"

She could hear his voice moving away from the nursery, further, becoming more distant. He must be going to the the medicine den on the other end of the camp. Suddenly, an image reappeared of herself in the den, and the whispers of two conniving cats flashed in her mind.

Oh no!

She jumped up from her nest.

What if Hawkwing is injured too? No, it can't be true!

She left her kits next to Daisy as she raced out of the nursery, almost tripping on her way out. The Queens' panicked, sorrowful gazes followed her out of the den as she burst into the camp.

Something is very wrong indeed, and I can't just stay in the nursery and do nothing.

All the cats were gathered around the medicine den, crowding around the entrance. Their pelts were bristled, and some of them were mourning with an incomprehensible look of loss. Squirrelstar squeezed through them. Many of the cats looked over at her, not being able to meet her eyes.

More surprisingly, they allowed her to pass without any hesitation. As she got closer to the den entrance, some of them looked at her with eyes full of pity and sympathy, an expression she had not seen on their faces for a long time. Squirrelstar knew what it was, but she didn't want to admit it. Her breath felt lost, and she suddenly felt she would collapse with sorrow. Her paws were heavy, but she knew she had to continue forward.

As she entered the medicine den, Sandstorm and Leafpool were sitting, their backs to her and their heads bent down. Coming

closer, she saw they were staring down at an empty nest. Their eyes were melancholy wells of despair. Neither of them looked at Squirrelstar or spoke to her.

A few tail-lengths away, Brambleclaw was sobbing loudly, curled up next to Jessy's limp body. He had his face buried in hers, their two brown pelts merged as one. The two kits were squished in between them, moving their paws against their mother restlessly and relentlessly.

Squirrelstar's paws gave way, and she hit the ground near the empty nest, broken and speechless. Sandstorm looked over at her, her eyes desolate. Her voice was solemn and hushed as she spoke.

"Firestar is dead."

Find book two, the Looming Shadows, on @Gingeroreocat's profile in the 'works' section :D